

Carry On Wayward Son
Sermon text: Galatians 3:10-14
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I. Be it resolved...

Alright you wayward sons and daughters, let's think back together, not to that song's release in 1976, but to the beginning of this year – to January 1, 2015. Now I know that not everybody does this, but there are a fair number of us who make New Year's resolutions – identifying bad habits we want to stop or good habits we want to develop. The start of a new year is a common time for us to make these resolutions. Those of us who are really brave might even write them down – like this. Anyone see their New Year's resolution on this list?

Whether or not you see your resolution on the screen, since it's July and 2015 is more than half over, how are you doing at kicking that bad habit or developing that good habit this year? Has your willpower been strong enough to make that change you were hoping to make? My guess is that your experience has been about like mine – my track record isn't too good when it comes to keeping my New Year's resolutions.

And I know that I'm not the only one. I see it every year over at Crunch – the gym where I go to work out. When do you think the worst time of year is at the gym in terms of overcrowding? That's right; it's the first two weeks of the New Year! After that people's willpower wavers, the crowds start to thin, and before you know it everything is back to normal.

The point is that if we rely on our willpower, on our own determination and self-discipline, to do what we want to do, what we know we should do – we can't do it. Our willpower isn't powerful enough. Our determination isn't determined enough. Our self-discipline isn't disciplined enough. We fail. And it's not just something that we struggle with. Here's what the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome: "For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." He had the same problem that we do.

This summer, in our study of Paul's letter to the Galatians, Pastor Joe has pointed this out as a major theme for the apostle. As we moved into the third chapter of Galatians last week, Megan showed us how Paul made the point again: it is not by doing good works that we earn favor with God, it is by faith that Christ did for us on the cross what we could never do for ourselves. By God's grace we have been saved through faith in Christ Jesus, and we don't even get to take credit for our faith – because faith is a...? That's right – faith is a gift from God.

II. Purpose of the Law

So this morning, as we turn our attention to the next section of Galatians 3, I'd like to focus on the relationship between grace, faith and the Law. Let's look at what Paul writes and then we'll unpack it a bit and try to figure out what it means for us today.

For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law." Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for "The one who is righteous will live by faith." But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, "Whoever does the works of the law will live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" – in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of

Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Paul once again makes it abundantly clear that we can't earn God's favor by observing the Law because we are unable to keep it perfectly – as we saw when we considered how we do with New Year's resolutions. On our own we really are wayward sons and daughters.

So then, what is the purpose of the Law? I mean, if we, as human beings, don't have what it takes to keep God's law, then why would the Lord command us to follow it? That almost seems cruel to tell us to do what we are incapable of doing. Believing that God is not cruel, there must be some other explanation, some other way for us to understand the Lord's purpose in giving us the Law.

And there is. In fact, there are three purposes for the Law and here they are. First, God gave humankind the Law in order to restrain evil in the world. If you think back in the Old Testament to the events that led to the flood, the Bible tells us that not only did humankind sin and fall away from our original intimate relationship with our Creator, but our wickedness and rebellion against the Lord multiplied and grew worse over time. In fact, it got so bad that God decided to cleanse the earth from human sin and preserve one family to start over again – Noah's family. The Lord also promised never again to destroy the earth with a flood. Instead, as a way to restrain human sin and evil, God gave the Law to Moses and the Hebrew people. The first purpose of the law is to restrain evil in the world.

That leads us to the second purpose of the Law. It is to make obvious our inability in our own power to live in a way that is pleasing to the Lord. God's covenant people, the Israelites, having received the Law were reminded time and time and time again that they were incapable of observing the whole Law. It showed them that they needed a Messiah, a Savior, one to guide them into right relationship with the Lord. God's Law continues to serve this second purpose – it makes it clear that, in our own power, you and I are not able to live in a way that is pleasing to the Lord. We need a Savior. We need Jesus.

And there is a third purpose for the Law. You could describe it as a positive purpose. Here it is – the third purpose of God's Law is to guide followers of Jesus in how to live life in ways that are pleasing to the Lord. A children's message that I heard many years ago has stuck in my mind as a faithful renaming of the Ten Commandments to get at this constructive purpose for the Law – these are God's Ten Best Ways to Live. The third purpose for the Law is to guide us in living the way the Lord intends for us to live in relationship with him and with one another.

III. An example of faith

So let's try to connect this purpose of the Law with living a life of faith. Our text this morning makes it clear by quoting the prophet Habakkuk that being righteous in God's sight has everything to do with faith. Sometimes I grow concerned that when we talk about our faith, or when we talk about what we believe that we don't understand those terms in a biblical way.

Here's what I mean. We might legitimately say when we look at this picture, "I believe the grass is green." We believe what we see is correct. We give mental assent to the fact that, with an appropriate amount of rain, the grass is green. However, believing the grass is green, even saying we have faith that the grass will be green doesn't make a difference in how we live.

True biblical belief, real faith in God is not like that. It does make a difference in how we live. The Apostle Paul names a great example for us of a person who demonstrated biblical belief, real faith in God that made a difference in how he lived. His given name was Abram and we meet him in the very first book of the Bible – Genesis.

In Genesis 11, we learn that Abram lived in Haran with his wife, Sarai, and his nephew Lot and Lot's family. Then at the beginning of Genesis 12, we find these verses:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

For Abram, having faith in God meant leaving everything that was familiar to him and setting out for an unknown destination. He trusted that the Lord would let him know when he arrived where he was supposed to be. Faith, you see, isn't just about mental assent that something is true. Biblical faith moves us to action that blesses others as God directs.

A couple of chapters later, in Genesis 15, we find the Lord once again communicating with Abram – making a promise to this elderly man who still had no children:

And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." But the word of the Lord came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Even though Abram and Sarai were childless in their old age, when God promised the man that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky, Abram believed the Lord. Biblical faith is like that – we trust God even when it doesn't make sense.

Finally, let's look at Genesis 22. After God has changed the man's name to Abraham because he would be the father of many nations, Abraham and Sarah finally had a son. They named him Isaac – the long-awaited heir, the obvious one through whom the Lord would fulfill his promise of many descendants for Abraham. Listen to what God told Abraham:

He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him.

Can you imagine? Can you imagine what Abraham was feeling as he loaded the wood on young Isaac's back and they trudged together up the mountain? Can you imagine what it took for Abraham to lay Isaac out on the altar and prepare to kill his own son, his only son? I'm not sure that I can. Can you imagine what it would have been like when God stopped Abraham and showed him the ram caught in the thicket that he was to sacrifice instead? That, my friends, is faith. That's what it means to believe in God.

You see, God doesn't have to imagine what Abraham was feeling because the Lord also offered his only son as a sacrifice. Except in Jesus' case, there was no ram caught in the thicket. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Do you believe in him? Because claiming faith in Jesus as the Christ is much more than mental assent. It means living life differently. It means following God to places you may never have wanted to go. It means carrying on, even when you feel like a wayward son or daughter, trusting God that there will be peace when you are done. So carry on, wayward son, carry on, wayward daughter. Amen.