

Galatians 3

(There were three baptisms taking place in the 10am congregation this Sunday. As such, there are comments made behind parentheses that are for those visitors to the 10am congregation).

I want to start by asking a question: How good do you have to be to be right with God? I reckon we all know, deep down somewhere, that God is there. I'd say most people have a feeling that we're not paying Him as much attention as we should, or we're not as good as we'd like to be. So, how good do we have to be? What do we have to do? And how long do I have to do it for? And, if you're a bit like me sometimes, what's the least I can do to be alright with God?

(Now I don't know if you've thought about these questions. A lot of you are here because you know the parents of the children being baptised this morning. Maybe this is a bit heavy for a Sunday morning. But I promise you this: There is no more important question in the world. There is nothing more pressing than this).

How do I get right with God? (It's an important question), a matter of life or death ultimately and so one worth getting right.

And our passage today helps us to answer this all-important question in a pretty unusual way. It's unusual because it teaches us the answer by showing us a false trail. That is, it shows us the way by warning us away from a common but lethal route, one you yourself may come to realise that you're walking.

But I need to set the scene a little bit. Before the Lord, or King, Jesus came, God's people were limited to a relatively small and unimpressive nation Israel. We can read all about the history of their dealings with God in the Old Testament. It's a wonderful account of how God chose a single man, Abraham, who we heard about in the reading, and from him and his wife made an entire nation. Even though they were thought to be too old to have children, God gave them a child. And long story short, several generations later there were probably hundreds of thousands of people. From that one man Abraham came an entire nation.

As the story continues, God took the nation out of Egypt where they had been kept as slaves and on the way to a new home he made a covenant with them. A covenant is a binding oath, a promise. God asked the people if they would have him as their God, if they would be his people. If they said yes, they were to live only with God as their God and they would have to live the way he wanted them to live.

The people were enthusiastic. Of course! They said. We want to live with you as our God, you are the only God. You bring blessing and protect us and love us. So God gave them the Law so they knew how they were to live. (Now it sounds a little confusing but they use the words 'the Law' to refer to a whole system of rules and regulations).

Now the Law that God gave them was good. But there was a problem. And the problem was with the people themselves. You see, the people, try as they might, were unable to keep the Law that God gave them. And so throughout the whole rest of the Old Testament we see God's people rebelling against God, choosing their own way to do things. Ignoring God, ignoring his Law.

God would be rightly aggrieved that they had abandoned him, as he should, and so he gave them the punishments he had promised if they ever did so. The people would realise how foolish they had been to turn away from God, they realised how foolish they were to turn away from the one who gave them everything and so they prayed to God and begged him to forgive them.

God is a kind and generous God. A gracious and forgiving God. And he would forgive them. And for a time the people were blessed by God.

And, under the blessing of God, the people tried to remain with God by keeping the Laws he gave them. But they were unable to do so. Try as they might, they couldn't keep all the Laws.

Now why am I telling you all this?

A few reasons. Firstly, now we know who Abraham is. He was the beginning of the nation of Israel. Secondly, now we know what the Law is, it's God's way of teaching his people how to live with him as their God, and we've learned that no one was able to keep all the laws because they kept turning away from God. But the reason you should care is because, I suspect there are people here today that are trying to be right with God, or hoping to be right with God in the same way. (You may not think of yourself as trying to do the Law but it's the same kind of thinking). I think there are people here this morning that, when it comes to God, are operating under the assumption that if I do enough of the right kind of things, God will probably? hopefully? be happy with me. Is that you?

The Bible talks about trying to get right with God that way, trying to do enough good things to make God happy with you. The Bible calls it 'works of the Law'. It's trying to keep enough of God's rules to make oneself right with God.

Maybe this is how you think. The Bible is pretty clear about whether or not that will work.

Let me show you what I mean. We'll pick it up at verse ten.

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 (that means declared not guilty) justified before God by the law.

Friends, do you see what this means? It means that that path is the wrong way.

The Bible says we can't get right with God by doing good works because we can not ever do them all. We can't keep all the Law. The only way we could is by keeping the entire Law and we can't.

And no one can be justified by the Law. No one can be declared not guilty by the Law. All of us fail at perfectly keeping God's commandments.

None of the Jews of the Old Testament were able to keep them all. Time and time and time again they slipped up. Sometimes they tried, sometimes they didn't but they never even got close. Doing good things to try and get right with God will never, never work. God gave us the Laws to do and we can't. There's no hope there. It's a dangerous path, a fatal path.

Friends, if that's what you're hoping will make you okay then I gotta tell you it's a false hope.

Maybe it's a vibe you have, maybe someone told you that this is how you make God happy, I don't know. But God is saying, here today, in his word, that no one is justified by doing the Law, by doing enough of the right things.

If this is you this morning, whether it's a vague kind of vibe you have about pleasing God or you're more actively trying to good, or you're working at just 'evening out the scales' whatever it looks like it's time to give it up. It won't work.

When I was younger, one of the things I enjoyed doing was caving. The concept is pretty simple: you get dressed in overalls, take a backpack full of lights and food and water and drop down into holes in the ground and explore. My favourite ones were the ones you had to abseil down into. Big, long abseils. One was nearly 50 metres, straights down. You bounced off the wall for the first 10 or so metres and then hung in your harness as you slid down the rope in mid-air. You have to push off and hope there's enough rope to see you to the bottom because you can't see the bottom because you're light isn't strong enough for it.

Now, one of the crazy things about caving is that once you're in far enough, there's no light. There's no sun, there's no moon. There is no light. The only way humans can see is if they bring their own lights. That's why we need to have at least three sources of light on us at all times.

There was a moment once I'll never forget. We all turned our lights off and waited as long as we could for our eyes to adjust. I held my hand in front of my face. And I couldn't see a thing.

Imagine that. Imagine being down a hole with a 50 metre abseil. You can't see. You don't know where you are. And you have no lights. No ropes. You can't get out. You don't have a chance.

This is how much chance we have of making ourselves right with God. In a sense, we know what we have to do. We need to find our way back to the entrance, in the dark and get back up a sheer wall that's more than 13 stories up, blind. The Law was like that. The Law shows us how good we have to be but we don't have a hope of doing it. We can scramble around in that cave all we want. Maybe some of us are closer to the edge than others. Maybe some of us have even tried climbing that sheer wall.

God's Law is good.
It's true and righteous and good.
But we can't do it.
We can't save ourselves.
We can't make ourselves right with God.

So what do we do? The Bible tells us, in verse 13.

Christ redeemed that means bought back out of slavery 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" –

The Lord Jesus Christ redeemed us by dying on the cross. He bought us back out of slavery by hanging on a tree. He lived the perfect life we never could, he was perfectly obedient to every law in the Old Testament. And this perfect man died on the cross taking the punishment we should have taken.

He became curse for us, he died in our place. He came and rescued us. It's like he brought his own light down into that cave and he found us and he picked us up and carried us out with him.

How are we to take hold of this? How are we saved from the curse of never being able to do enough to please God? Faith. We put our faith in the Lord Jesus.

Now before I go any further I need to say something about the word faith. Faith is a word that English speaking Christians have been using for centuries. We use it because the Bible uses it. Today's passage talks about faith at several places.

The problem is, often when *Christians* use the word faith, *unbelievers* hear the word differently to how we're using it. And that's because the meaning of the word has changed over the last few decades.

Most people these days use it to mean something that you can't prove. Y'know you 'take it on faith'. Are you sure this is safe? 'Have a little faith'.

Just trust me. I'm not going to prove it. I'm just asking you to believe, even if you're pretty uncertain.

Sometimes people are a bit more explicit. Science can prove this much, the rest you'll just have to take on faith. It's trusting without or beyond the evidence.

So when Christians talk about having faith, often unbelievers roll their eyes because they think Christians believe without or in spite of the evidence. I know because I used to be that way too.

I thought it was self-evidently stupid that Christians were proud of the fact that they had 'faith' because it meant that they were not interested in the evidence.

But that's not what we're saying at all. Christians mean something different than that because *the Bible* means something different when it talks about faith. Far from being in spite of the evidence, faith is about trusting *in* the evidence. In fact, it's even more simple than that, because in the Bible faith is just another word for trust.

In fact, you could substitute the word 'trust' wherever you see the word 'faith' and it would be correct.

Read back over the passage if you want, it may make more sense now that we realise that the Bible simply means 'trust' when it says 'faith'. When it says 'have faith' it usually just means 'believe or trust in'.

Why do I labour the point so much? Well, apart from wanting to make clear what's in front of us and to help us to understand, verse 25 says.

But now that faith has come, we are no longer subjects to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.

Paul had been talking about the Law that God gave as a sort of disciplinarian for us. It helped to keep us from going off the rails too much. But now faith had come. Or to put it another way, faith (or trust) is now an option in being right with God. We trust that what God did on the cross is enough to make us right with him. We have faith in the Lord Jesus and his death on that tree.

And if we do, we have the wonderful promise that we will be made children of God. Now to some, that may sound a bit of a put down, being called children, but it's the best gift in the world. Instead of being enemies of God, in that cave, in the dark, shut away from him we have the chance to be up in the sunshine, enjoying the relationship with God that we were always meant to have. We are part of God's family, he's rescued us and now we enjoy all the benefits of being right with God.

The curse is lifted, we don't have to constantly struggle, hoping, maybe fearing, that we'll do enough. It's over, it's finished. It's done, we're rescued. We're out of the cave. We're safe. It's over. That's what's available to us if we trust in the Lord Jesus.

(What can we say of these children being baptised here today? What would I tell them?)

Verse 27 says,

As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

If you have been baptised, (and later, if and when these children endorse the promises made on their behalf, taking them on themselves) then the thing to do is be clothed with Christ, to walk in the manner in which he walked, to live like him. It means that you are to live the Christian life.

If you have spent your entire life underground, in cave. Where it's cold, and dark and wet. And you have been rescued and brought out into the sun, into God's family where it's warm and it's filled with light...you'd be thankful right? You'd be thankful for the rescue that's been made. That's the motivation for godly living. We respond to God with obedience because of our thankfulness.

How are you to live now? You live the life that's meant to be lived outside. You live God's way. Not so that you can get yourself out, you're already free. You live God's way *because* you're right with God.

(I hope this is how the parents and the god-parents helping along the way are planning to raise these beautiful children.

Raise them as God's precious children,
in his wonderful light.

Teach them to love his ways and to listen to God. The symbol of baptism is no guarantee that they will remain.

Teach them to listen to God).

For those of us who are Christian, let us remember the wonderful gift that is ours by faith. We are God's. And let us not continue any differently to how we started: by faith. Let's continue to trust God as we live to please him. And let us tell everyone of how the Lord Jesus rescued us when we could not. Let's call on them to trust in the one who rescues. **Pray here at 8am.**

Lastly, if you've come this here this morning and something has been stirred in you as you listened, do something about that. If you are finding that you want to know more, or you are unsure about something, or you think I've got it wrong and you want to ask, do something about that. Come and chat to me, come and chat with Pete. Ask some questions, find out more. I started by asking, 'How good do you have to be to be right with God?' We've seen that we can never be good enough. But we've also seen that there is a rescue in the offer. A rescue that God offers if you would just trust in him. Why not find out if he's worth putting your trust in. It's the best and most important decision you'll ever make. **Pray here at 10am.**

Let's pray.