

## INTRODUCTION

One of my favorite WWII movies is “The Great Escape,” released in 1963. My favorite scene is where Steve McQueen, who became a superstar after the movie, escaped from the German soldiers by riding a motorcycle through a field. He jumped a fence on his motorcycle, but was soon captured by the Germans. FYI, Steve McQueen rode the motorcycle for most of that scene, but it was a stunt man who jumped the fence.

The movie was based on a true story of WWII prisoners of war who made several attempts to escape from a high security German Prison camp built to be inescapable. After months of digging tunnels, several dozen POWs escaped. The Great Escape wasn’t all that great, because all but three POWs were caught or killed. But three of them did make it to freedom. The movie added some fictional elements to enhance the story. For instance, no American prisoners were part of the final effort, and there wasn’t a motorcycle escape scene. The movie is called “The Great Escape,” not because a great number of them escaped but because of their great efforts to plan and execute the escape plan and their great success in undermining the moral of the German soldiers.

Our passage today speaks of a successful great escape. The Bible says every person on planet earth is or was held as a prisoner in the most maximum-security prison ever built. The prison is called sin—and none of us can escape from this prison on our own. There have been many attempts through the years to escape this prison, but all have failed. Grace is God’s ability to declare us to be free from the prison and faith is the only key that unlocks the prison door. So today we’re going to talk about “Grace: The Great Escape.”

The context of our passage is found in verses 6 and 7. Paul was using the Old Testament character of Abraham to drive home his point. He wrote: “Consider Abraham: ‘He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham.” (Galatians 3:6-7)

Now let’s look at our text beginning in Galatians 3:15. This scripture involves a lot of Jewish history taught in the Mishnah (a rabbinical commentary on the Old Testament). If you haven’t read the Jewish Mishnah lately, some of these verses can be confusing, so I’ll drop in a few explanatory comments as we move through the passage.

Galatians 3:15-25. “Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. [Abraham’s covenant with God can’t set aside. The example from everyday life is when you sign a contract to buy a house or a car; you can’t just toss aside the contract without suffering the consequences.] The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ. What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later [Moses received the Ten Commandments 430 years after God’s promise to Abraham], does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.

[God’s grace goes all the way back to Abraham!] What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator [That means angels delivered the Ten Commandments to Moses who mediated the law to the people]. A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one. Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

God hates religious legalism so much, He devoted an entire book in the Bible to address it: Galatians. Paul had started these churches in the area of modern day Turkey by preaching the gospel of grace. His message was “Jesus + nothing = salvation.” But some Jewish teachers had infiltrated the church and were teaching “Jesus + obeying the law = salvation.” For instance, these legalistic teachers demanded Gentile men be circumcised, and that they had to observe the Sabbath and all the Jewish dietary rules, like a Jewish soup Nazi, “No pork for you!” When Paul heard about this, he fired off this scorching letter exposing these false teachers and encouraging the believers NOT to fall away from the gospel of grace. That’s why I’ve entitled the series, “Don’t Stray from the Grace-Way.”

As I was praying through this text in Israel I asked several of the trip participants to read these verses and tell me what they thought. They said this passage confused them. It left them with more questions than answers. I said, “What questions?” They replied, “Well, why do we even need the Old Testament Law anymore? Did Jesus come to replace the law? How can I be good enough for God?” I figured if they had those questions, that you might have them, too, so in this message I’ll answer three questions comparing God’s grace with the law of Moses.

## **I. Q: WHY DO WE EVEN HAVE THE OLD TESTAMENT LAW?**

### **A: TO LEAD US TO JESUS**

All of the Old Testament was pointing to the coming of the promised Messiah. God made a promise to Abraham that He would make a mighty nation from his descendants, that he would give him so many children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren that they would outnumber the sands of the sea. By faith, Abraham believed God’s promise. It was hard, because God waited until Abraham was 100 years old (and Sarah was 90) before Isaac was born. Paul points out that God’s promise to Abraham was fulfilled in Jesus.

The Ten Commandments didn’t come for 430 years after God’s graceful promise to Abraham. But the purpose of the law was the same—to point people to Jesus. But there were hundreds of other laws about what they could eat or not eat; what they could touch and not touch; how to conduct all the temple sacrifices; special holidays to observe. God actually laid so many laws on them to let them see that no person could keep all the laws.

All of the laws of the Old Testament were given to show that no person could be as holy as God. Without laws to break, they wouldn’t have realized they were sinners who needed forgiveness.

Let me illustrate that by talking about a highway. Imagine that when they open the rest of Loop 49 in a few months that they don’t post speed limit signs, they just decide to let people drive any speed they like. Now, how many of you are going to drive 40 mph? How many of you are going to drive 70? How many of you are going to drive 85 or faster? Go ahead, there’s no law on that road. That’s how people lived before God gave the law. Some were careful, but most were careless in regards to others, but nobody felt guilty.

Then one day you drive on Loop 49 and they have posted 70 mph speed limit signs—that’s like God giving the law through Moses. The day before when you were driving 85 you weren’t guilty, because there wasn’t a law, but suddenly there’s a law and if you drive 71 mph, you’re guilty. It was the law that actually defined what sin was.

God gave the Old Testament Law so people would realize they are sinners who need a Savior. Here’s how Eugene Petersen translates Galatians 3:23: “Until the time when we were mature enough to respond freely in faith to the living God, we were carefully surrounded and protected by the Mosaic law. The law was like those Greek tutors, with which you are familiar, who escort children to school and protect them from danger or distraction, making sure the children will really get to the place they set out for. But now you have arrived at your destination.” (Galatians 3:23-25, *The Message*)

To use a picture we can understand, the Old Testament Law is like the school crossing guards we have in Tyler. When school is starting or letting out, these men and women are there to escort the students across the street. They protect them from cars that might hurt them. But the school crossing area isn’t their destination. And the crossing guards aren’t the teachers; they are just making sure the students are safe on their way to their teachers and to their homes. The school crossing guards aren’t the destination; they are only there to help students to their destination. The law was given to escort us to faith in Christ.

## **II. Q: DID JESUS COME TO REPLACE THE OLD TESTAMENT LAW?**

### **A: NO! HE CAME TO COMPLETE THE LAW**

That’s an easy answer because Jesus addressed it Himself. He said: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them... You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me... If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.” (Matthew 5:17; John 5:39, 46)

Jesus clearly taught that the Old Testament was about Him. Take the Ten Commandments for instance. Do you remember the easy way to memorize the Ten Commandments? I taught you this song about 15 years ago: “Number One we’ve just begun; God should be first in your life; Number two’s the idol rule; those graven images aren’t nice. Number three God’s name should be; never spoken in jest. Number four, the Sabbath’s for our worship and our rest. Number five we all should strive to honor father and mother; Number six don’t get your kicks from killing

one another. Number seven life is heaven when you're true to your mate. Number eight don't steal and break this rule for goodness sake! Number nine don't be the kind who goes around telling lies. Number ten don't covet when you see your neighbor's house or wife. That's the list and God insists we stay away from these sins. That is why we memorize commandments one through ten."

The first four commandments dealt with our relationship with God; and the last six deal with our relationship with each other. In Matthew 22 Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was. Listen carefully to His answer: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:36-40)

When you love the Lord your God with all your being, you will obey the first four commandments. When you love your neighbor as yourself you will observe the last six commandments. Jesus said *all* the law and prophets are completed in those two commandments.

So, we should never just rip the Old Testament out of our Bibles. It is the inspired Word of God. But we should always read it through the filter of the coming of Jesus, because He fulfilled it. The Old Testament says, "Someone is coming." The New Testament says, "Someone has come." And Revelation says, "Someone is coming again!"

### **III. Q: HOW CAN I BE GOOD ENOUGH FOR GOD?**

#### **A: I CAN'T! I MUST SURRENDER TO GRACE**

Let's face it; some people in our world are better than others. There are plenty of law-abiding citizens, and we consider ourselves morally superior to those locked away for criminal activities. But when it comes to God's standard, the Bible says, "For ALL have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

Let's imagine Bill Gates offers a million dollars to anyone who can swim from San Francisco to Hilo, Hawaii. There are no takers, so he raises the reward to \$100 million. Still no takers, so he raises it to \$1 billion. That's just too much to resist so on the appointed day, 100 swimmers show up. 50 of them don't make it out of the currents of San Francisco Bay. Another 30 give up after ten miles. Another 15 make it to 20 miles. The only remaining swimmers are five Olympic long distance swimmers. One by one they drop out and have to be rescued. The final swimmer, an Olympic Gold winner female long distance swimmer, makes it an astounding 215 miles. But she is still 2,000 miles short of Hawaii. As she is pulled into the boat, she says with an exhausted voice. "I swam further than anyone else; don't I get a part of the prize money?" Bill Gates says, "Sorry, the prize was all or nothing." That's the problem with keeping the law: it's a pass/fail only. And God doesn't grade on the curve. We're all guilty, so our only hope is to accept the grace of God. Now, let me share a couple of take-home truths with you:

#### **A. Legalism locks you in a maximum-security prison**

Paul wrote, “Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed.” (Galatians 3:23) When I use the word “legalism” I’m not talking about the legal community (lawyers and judges). We should make sure everything we do is legal in regards to Texas and U.S. Law. I’m talking about spiritual legalism. Legalism is the belief that by obeying a set of rules you can attain or maintain God’s approval and acceptance. I like the way Jerry Bridges describes legalism: “Legalism occurs wherever a sinner attempts to earn God’s favor by his or her personal righteousness instead of by Christ’s transferred righteousness. Legalism demeans the value of Christ’s work of atonement by requiring sinners to perform activities that are man-centered, and in essence, man-exalting.” (*The Great Exchange: My Sin for His Righteousness*, p. 156)

Jewish legalism is alive and well today. You don’t have to go back 2,000 years to see it. Just this week an Orthodox Jewish high school in Houston was scheduled to play a basketball game on Friday night. The Jewish Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday, so they appealed to the league to move the starting time of their game. At first the league refused, but after some parents filed a lawsuit, and there was public pressure, the team was allowed to play at 2:00 Friday afternoon.

Will playing basketball on Saturday keep you out of heaven? You’d better hope not! As absurd as that sounds, there is also plenty of Christian legalism around us. The clearest example would be those groups who call themselves Christians but demand you must worship on Saturday, and refrain from eating things like pork, shrimp, and catfish. But there are more subtle examples of Christian legalism. Through the years I’ve met well-meaning Christians who believed that going to a movie, playing cards, or dancing would cause you to be spiritually demoted to some lesser status in God’s eyes. I’ve met people who said you must dress in a coat and tie to truly worship God. I’ve heard preachers say if a man has long hair, or if a woman wears pants or shorts, that God isn’t happy. I’ve said before that a legalist is someone whose list of “Thou Shalt Not’s” is longer than Gods. If you think that there is something you can DO today to make God love you more or to make him love you less, then you may be trapped in the prison of legalism.

## **B. Your only escape from the prison of sin is through God’s grace, activated by faith!**

Paul wrote, “Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.” (Galatians 3:25) Remember our school crossing guards? When you get to college you don’t need those school crossing guards any more. When you come to faith in Jesus, you no longer need the supervision of the law. Of course, you want to obey God out of love, but you are no longer in subjection to the prison guard called “Old Testament Law.”

I’ve answered three questions about this passage, so now I have a couple of questions for you.

**1. Was Abraham saved?** In other words, will Abraham be in heaven? Raise your hand if you think, “Yes.” Here’s the second question: **2. HOW was Abraham saved?** Remember he lived during the Old Testament days; so how many of you think he was saved by keeping the law? Oh, right, the law wasn’t even given until 430 years later. Oops.

Listen carefully: Abraham, Moses, David, Ruth, and Deborah were saved the same way we’re saved—by God’s grace through faith. God graciously gave them the promise of a coming

Messiah, and they believed God. They didn't know His name would be Jesus, but we do. If just believing God's promise looking forward to Jesus could save Abraham, how can you refuse to place your faith in Jesus, who has already come?

My definition of God's grace is: God giving me what I need instead of what I deserve. I deserve death and hell, but instead, God has given me what I need most, forgiveness and acceptance. Faith is not just believing facts about Jesus, it is trusting Jesus with your life and your future.

I read about a college physics professor who was demonstrating the law of a pendulum to his class. He had a small pendulum on a string attached to the marker board in front of the class. He demonstrated that because of gravity and the resistance of air, when a pendulum swings the width of the arc decreases with every swing. It would never swing as far out as the previous swing. As the pendulum was swinging he would mark where it swung each time, so there were a series of marks getting closer and closer until equilibrium had been reached and the pendulum hung straight down.

He then asked the class how many of them believed the law of the pendulum and every student held up their hand. Then he asked, "Do you REALLY believe in the law of the pendulum?" And again the students all raised their hands. He said, "Let's see." He asked for a volunteer, and a male student volunteered. He had the class turn around toward the back where he had rigged a 200-pound weight on a steel cable suspended from a girder in the ceiling.

He had the student climb up on a table and sit in a chair facing the pendulum with his head against the wall. Then the professor had a couple of students lift the weight right up to the student's nose, just a fraction of an inch from his face. He then said, "If the law of the pendulum is true, then they release this weight and it swings back, it will return short of the point where it was released. Just keep the back of your head against the wall and you will be in no danger when the weight swings back. Do you trust the law of the pendulum?"

Then with everyone in the class watching, he had them release the weight and it swung toward the other wall and started back toward the face of the student. The professor said you've never seen a student move as fast as that young man did as he dove off the table to get out of the way. It was one thing for the student to say he believed the law of the pendulum, but when it came down to it, he didn't really trust it. His belief was only theoretical. You can say you believe that Jesus is the Son of God and He died for your sins, but when it comes down to it, are you willing to TRUST Him completely?

## CONCLUSION

Last fall, we had the privilege of going into the Coffield Maximum Security Unit to preach the gospel to the inmates. I met men who, though they are behind bars, they were spiritually free in their hearts and minds because of God's grace. The warden gave me a tour and I saw other men who were languishing in solitary confinement, and it was sadly obvious that some of them had given up any hope of being set free.

Every day we encounter people who aren't behind prison bars, but they are locked away in the prison of sin. Maybe you feel like you are in the solitary confinement of sin. Faith in Jesus is the key that unlocks all the blessings of God. It is the only key that can set you free from the prison cell of sin.

Harry Houdini was one of the most famous escape artists in history. He claimed he could be locked in any jail cell in the world, and he would escape within one hour. Once when he was in the British Isles a small town had built a new jail and they were proud of it. They invited Houdini to come see if he could escape. He accepted the invitation and when the door clanged shut, he asked the officers to give him privacy. He always hid a special lock pick he had designed in his belt. He removed the pick and began to work on the lock. After 30 minutes he was frustrated and he started to sweat as he intensified his work trying to pick the lock. An hour passed and he still wasn't able to unlock the door. After the officers returned, Houdini collapsed in frustration against the prison door—and it swung open. The reason he couldn't pick the lock was because it hadn't been locked in the first place. The door had been locked only in his mind.

How many of us have had the same problem? We think the door to freedom and happiness can be picked open by our own efforts, when Jesus has already declared us to be free. You may be sweating and straining at the thoughts of facing a holy God. You may be locked up by your fear of the future, tormented by the fact that you can't DO everything you think you should be doing for God. And meanwhile, through His grace, God has already unlocked the door to freedom—will you live in the freedom of His grace? That's the great escape!

## OUTLINE

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A: TO LEAD US TO JESUS

"Until the time when we were mature enough to respond freely in faith to the living God, we were carefully surrounded and protected by the Mosaic law. The law was like those Greek tutors, with which you are familiar, who escort children to school and protect them from danger or distraction, making sure the children will really get to the place they set out for. But now you have arrived at your destination."

*Galatians 3:23-25, The Message*

### II. Q: DID JESUS COME TO REPLACE THE OLD TESTAMENT LAW?

A: NO! HE CAME TO COMPLETE THE LAW

Jesus said: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them... You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me... If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me." *Matthew 5:17; John 5:39, 46*

### III. Q: HOW CAN I BE GOOD ENOUGH FOR GOD?

A: I CAN'T! I MUST SURRENDER TO GRACE

Take-Home Truths:

A. Legalism locks you in a maximum-security prison

B. Your only escape from the prison of sin is through God's grace, activated by faith!

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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes