

## INTRODUCTION

Twelve years ago, as we moved into the year 2000, I shared a message series called "Y2K: Say Yes to the King." One of the things I talked about was my belief that as we moved into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century we were going to find our faith come under increasing attacks in America.

We're seeing growing evidence of that as anti-Christian groups are aggressively attempting to remove any mention of Christ from Christmas. Twenty years ago you never heard of a Holiday Tree or a Winter Solstice Festival. Over the past few seasons the American Atheists Association has ramped up their efforts to secularize Christmas. Last Christmas, they put up a huge billboard near the Lincoln Tunnel in New York City that pictured the three wise men approaching the stable. The caption read: "You KNOW it's a myth—this season, celebrate REASON!" And they even brag that their atheist association has been around since 1963 (It was founded in Austin, Texas by Madalyn Murray O'Hair.)

This year, they have placed another billboard in the same location. There are pictures of a statue of Neptune, Jesus, Santa, and a mean looking devil. The caption says: "37 million Americans know MYTHS when they see them. What myths do you see?"

Actually, it's not very reasonable to try to attack Jesus using guilt by association. That logic makes as little sense as if they put George Washington's picture up there with Neptune. If they did, would that make you believe George Washington was a myth?

The American Atheists are guilty of an academic cop-out. IF they consulted the historical records outside the Bible they would see the existence of Jesus is an established fact of history—not a myth. There are several reliable historical writers who state the fact of the existence of Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified by Pontius Pilate.

But lest you think this attack on Christmas is confined just to those heathen, northern states, think again. An organization in Wisconsin has objected to the Nativity display in Athens. The huge rally yesterday sent a strong message to those Christmas grinchers: "Don't Mess with East Texas—or our Christmas beliefs!"

I like the message I saw on Southern Oak's church sign this week. It said, "Merry mas – it's not the same without Christ." Amen. I like the message on the shirt I saw on a lady at Lifeway last week. It said, "I will NOT be silent about the silent night event." I agree. Let's lovingly remind people by saying, "Merry Christmas." But don't say it harshly; say it sweetly.

One of our most cherished Christmas carols is "Joy to the World," composed by Isaac Watts. When Isaac Watts started writing hymns he was considered a radical, and his music was banned from many churches. Before him, all the music sung in churches came straight from the Psalms. All generations of Christians have had trouble accepting the music of the younger generation. I'm glad we have accepted "Joy to the World," because it contains some powerful theological lessons about the MEANING of Christmas. I've based the title of today's message on a phrase in the third stanza. (And if you grew up in a Baptist church where they only sang the first, second, and last verse, you might have missed it).

The song says: "No more let sins and sorrows grow; Nor thorns infest the ground; He comes to make His blessings flow; Far as the curse is found, Far as the curse is found, Far as, far as, the curse is found."

What curse is he talking about? And how far is this curse really found? Our scripture from Galatians answers those questions. As we read Galatians 3:6-14, notice the recurrence of the word "curse."

"Consider Abraham: 'He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.' So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.' Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, 'The righteous will live by faith.' The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, 'The man who does these things 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 is hung on a tree.' He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."

The theme of Galatians is that living under the Law enslaves us, but living in grace sets us free. So, why would anyone who had been saved by grace, go back and start living like a legalist? Performance-based religion makes us feel good about ourselves. This week God showed me something I'd never seen before. I thought evangelism was what you only did to LOST people. The word "evangelism" means to "share the good news." I came to realize as I studied this passage that as Paul wrote to these Christians, he was re-evangelizing them. And we need to be constantly re-evangelizing each other, reminding ourselves that salvation is by grace instead of by works.

As Paul argued this truth, he gives us a historical example of faith: Abraham. Then he contrasts the curse of sin with the curse Jesus bore on the cross. Let's examine each of these truths:

## **1. ABRAHAM IS OUR EXAMPLE FOR LIVING BY FAITH**

In verse seven we read, "Those who believe are children of Abraham." If you've ever been to a Kid's Kamp chances are you've sung, "Father Abraham had many sons; Many sons had Father Abraham; I am one of them; and so are you; so let's just praise the Lord!" And by the time you added right arm, left arm, right foot, left foot, chin up, chin down, and turn around, you were falling over with laughter.

The truth of that song is based on Galatians 3:7. All of us who believe as Abraham did are children of Abraham. He is called the Father of faith. God told Abraham to leave his home in Ur (Iraq) and head toward a land that He would show him. It took major faith for Abraham to leave

without knowing where he was going. Before most of us leave on a trip we want to program the destination in our GPS to find the best route. Abraham didn't have a Global Positioning System; he had a better GPS: God's Positioning Spirit.

It took enduring faith for Abraham to believe God's promise that he would have so many descendants they would outnumber the stars. He had to keep on believing God for decades because when he and Sarah were both approaching 100 years of age, they were still childless. But God kept his promise, and a little baby named "Laughter" was born—Isaac.

But the hardest act in Abraham's life was when God tested Abraham's faith. He asked him to take his only son, Isaac, and to sacrifice him to God. That required radical faith!

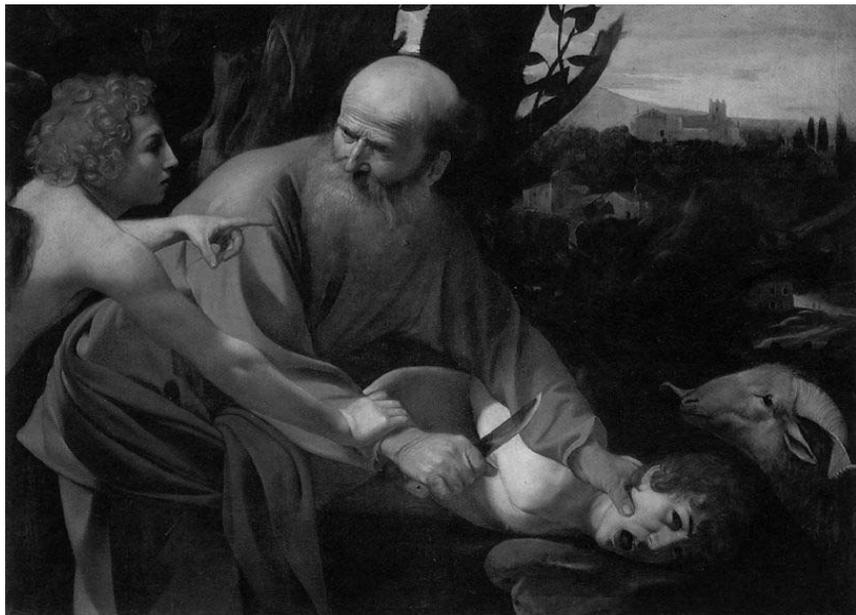
Michelangelo Caravaggio had the misfortune of sharing the first name of the most famous Italian artist of history. Caravaggio was a prolific painter of religious scenes, but he died in obscurity. He is one of my favorite Italian artists, and one of his most famous paintings is the one depicting Abraham offering Isaac on Mt. Moriah.

You can see Abraham with the knife in his hand ready to take the life of his precious son. At the last moment, God sent an angel to stop Abraham. In addition, God sent a ram, caught in a thicket, to be a substitute for Isaac. Although Isaac walked up the hill to die, he walked back down alive because a lamb was sacrificed in his place.

This is an important prophecy of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The hill of Calvary where Jesus died was only a stone's throw from where

Abraham took Isaac. Like Isaac, Jesus walked up the hill. But He had no substitute; He WAS our substitute. But like a living Isaac, Jesus walked down the hill after God raised Him from the dead.

When some people read this story of Abraham and Isaac they have two objections. First, they say, "What kind of God would ask a Father to sacrifice his son?" The short answer to that is, "The same kind of God who would also sacrifice His Son on the same hill." But remember, God knew Isaac wasn't going to die. The second objection people have is, "What kind of father was



*The Sacrifice of Isaac*  
Oil on Canvas, 1603  
Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio

Abraham, to even consider killing his son?" I don't have to answer that question, because the New Testament answers it.

"By faith, Abraham, at the time of testing, offered Isaac back to God. Acting in faith, he was as ready to return the promised son, his only son, as he had been to receive him—and this after he had already been told, 'Your descendants shall come from Isaac.' Abraham figured that if God wanted to, he could raise the dead. In a sense, that's what happened when he received Isaac back, alive from off the altar." (Hebrews 11:17-19 *The Message*) Radical faith was believing that even if Abraham killed his son, God would raise him from the dead.

The Bible says, "Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness." Now, there's a word most of us understand "credited." I don't have any cash on me, but I could walk into a restaurant after church and enjoy a delicious meal. When I get ready to pay, I can say, "I don't have any cash on me, but this credit card means there is a bank somewhere that will pay you for this food." The restaurant will swipe the card through a reader and if I've been paying my bills, and I haven't gone over my credit limit, it's going to say, "approved." Of course, the sad thing about credit cards is you have to get around to paying for everything you charge on them.

What if I got my credit card statement one month and it had a notation that said, "Credited to your account \$40 million?" Well, once I got up off the floor, I would wonder if it was mistake. But after I call the company, I'm told that Warren Buffett just decided to randomly play secret Santa to someone, and I was it! Wow! What would I do with \$40 million? I'd pay off the debt on the Crosswalk Conference Center and then give most of it away!

But in order to access the \$40 million that was credited to me, I would have to exercise faith. I would have to BELIEVE Warren Buffett exists and he has the resources to transfer that amount to my account. But only when I actually SPENT the money would I be demonstrating faith.

When you believe God, He credits to our account something a billion times more valuable than money; He credits the righteousness of Jesus to our spiritual account. Will you believe Him and act on it? Abraham did and so should we!

## **2. LIVING BY RULES IS A CURSE BECAUSE IT IS IMPOSSIBLE**

In verse 10 we read, "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse...Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law."

Trying to earn goodness by keeping the Old Testament Law was like trying to scale two massive walls. The first wall was that you had to CONTINUE to obey the rules. It couldn't be hit and miss; you had to obey every second of every day of your life. The second massive wall you had to obey EVERYTHING, not just the Ten Commandments, but all the hundreds of tedious, obscure rules as well.

Paul argued that the only thing the Old Testament Law does is show us we CAN'T keep it! If you've been to Galveston I'm sure you've seen the Flagship Hotel built on a pier over the Gulf.

It's been a Galveston landmark for decades – and is currently being torn down because of damage from Hurricane Ike.

When they first opened the Flagship Hotel they had a real problem. Guests tried fishing from their balconies. They used heavy sinkers to cast the bait into the water. Sometimes while reeling them in, the heavy sinkers would swing back and shatter the \$600 windows below.

After spending a great sum of money without solving the problem, the management came up with a brilliant idea that fixed the problem. They simply removed the signs that said, "No fishing from Balcony" signs. It worked!

In other words, the signs prohibiting fishing actually gave people the idea to try it! And any prohibition appeals to our fallen nature to break the rules. How many times have you walked up to a park bench that said, "Wet paint?" And what did you do? You touched it. That's what the Old Testament Law does; it tells you what's wrong, but that only makes us want to try it!



*The Flagship Hotel, Galveston, TX*

I believe it's no accident that the final word in the Old Testament sums up the entire message of the Old Testament. In case you're ever on Jeopardy and the answer is, "this word is the last word in the Old Testament." You can correctly respond, "What is 'curse' Alex?" The last verse says, "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decree and laws I gave him...or else I will strike the land with a CURSE." (Malachi 4:4-6) The message of the Old Testament is: Keep the Law and you'll be good; but disobey it at any point and you carry a curse.

Legalism has no wiggle-room for our mistakes. If you break the rules, you're broken on the rules. The law is hard and fast and never takes into consideration any exceptions. The frustration of trying to obey every rule and regulation reminds me of a shopping experience a friend told me about. Robert was in a large store shopping for a pair of binoculars. He arrived at the counter and one employee was obviously talking on his phone to his girlfriend and ignored Robert. So Robert walked down to the other end of the counter where another employee was stacking inventory onto a shelf. Robert said, "Excuse me, but may I get some help?" Without even looking the employee said, "Got a number?" Robert looked around and said, "But I'm the only customer." The employee said, "It doesn't matter. You gotta' have a number. Those are the rules." It was obvious to Robert that she was more interested in following company rules than helping customers. So he walked down to the other end of the counter and pulled number 38 from the machine, walked back and asked, "Now can you help me?" She walked over to her register that showed that the last customer served had number 34. She said, "Number 35....35?" And she waited while Robert tapped his toe. Then she said, "Number 36. Is number 36 here?" She waited again, and asked, "Is number 37 here?" By this time Robert had exhausted his patience. Without looking at Robert she finally said, "Number 38. I'll help number 38 now." Robert said, "I'm number 38." Without cracking a smile she said, "Can I help you?" Robert laid his ticket on the

counter and said, "No, thank you" and walked out of the store. He ended the story by saying he'll never shop there again because they are more interested in company rules than customer service. That's a sad picture of the Old Testament law. It was life lived strictly by the rules, with no wiggle room.

### **3. WE ARE REDEEMED WHEN WE TRUST JESUS WHO TOOK OUR CURSE UPON THE TREE**

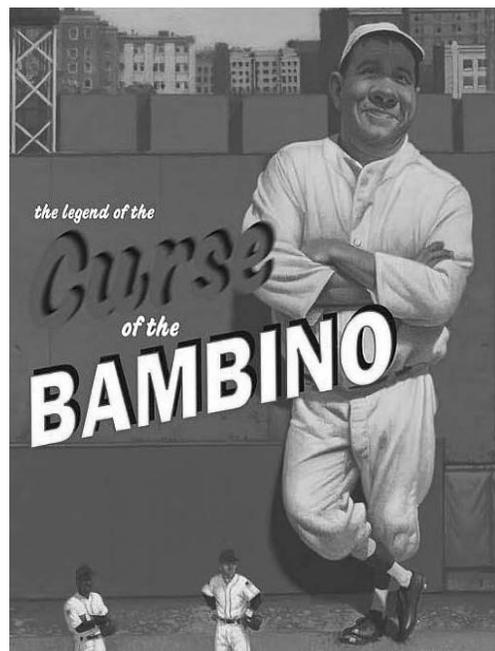
In verse 13 we read, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us..." Notice the word "us" in that verse? Who is the "us?"

Does that mean everyone on the planet will be redeemed? No. Jesus died for the sins of everyone in the world, but the Bible teaches that only those who trust Him are redeemed. So are you in the "us" who have been redeemed? Ask the person next to you, "Are you in the 'us'?" If you're not in the "us," you'd better get on the bus that goes to the cross, because that's the only way to be saved.

If you follow baseball you've heard of the "curse of the Bambino."

In 1910 the Boston Red Sox sold Babe Ruth to the Yankees. The Red Sox had won five world championships before they sold the Bambino, but then they went for almost nine decades without winning the World Series. Everyone called it "the curse of the Bambino." But in 2004, the Curse of the Bambino was broken when the Red Sox did something our Rangers couldn't do last fall. They were playing the St. Louis Cardinals and were down 0-3 and came back to win the next four games to win the World Series—and the curse was broken.

The curse of the Bambino is only sports superstition, but the curse of sin is real. Disobedience to the law carries a curse, so without Jesus we're all cursed. At the cross, the only man who ever lived a sinless life chose to take our curse upon Himself when He bore our sins. The Bible says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." (1 Peter 2:24)



*The Legend of the Curse of the Bambino*  
by Dan Shaughnessy  
Illustrated by C. F. Payne

Dr. Ray Pritchard is a great Bible teacher, and he has a graphic way of describing what happened when Jesus took our curse: "Imagine that somewhere in the universe there is a cesspool containing all the sins that have ever been committed. The cesspool is deep, dark, and indescribably foul. Imagine that a river of filth constantly flows into that cesspool, replenishing the vile mixture with all the evil done every day. Now imagine that while Jesus was on the cross,

that cesspool is emptied onto him. The flow never seems to stop. It is vile, toxic, deadly, filled with disease, pain and suffering. No wonder God the Father turned away from the sight. All the lust in the world was there. All the murder; all the hatred between people. All the pornography, all the drunkenness, all the bitterness, all the greed, all the crime, all the cursing; every vile deed, every wicked thought, every vain imagination—all of it was laid upon Jesus when he hung on the cross."

Do you remember the last word of the Old Testament? Curse. I'm thankful for a God who takes care of every problem in the world. When we come to the very last chapter of the Bible, we read these powerful words: "No longer will there be any curse." (Revelation 22:3)

## CONCLUSION

Most of us struggle with the pure grace of God because we feel better about ourselves if we can do something to earn God's favor. In fact Carl Trueman writes: "Grace is counter-intuitive, beyond price and yet totally free. Left to ourselves we hate it."

When I say grace is counter-intuitive I mean the idea of grace goes against our human nature. Everything in our nature says, "Try hard. Work hard. Earn acceptance with God." But salvation is not by trying; it is by trusting.

I love hanging out with my grandchildren. The other night a couple of them were staying at our house and we were giving them a bath. Of course, bath time is playtime, and there are more toys in the tub than you can count. But you eventually have to get around to washing. I had washed their hair with baby shampoo and I had a cup to rinse off the soap. So I said what every parent or grandparent says, "Look up! Look up and you won't get soap in your eyes." But that goes against human nature. The natural response is for them to look down when you start pouring the water, and then to wipe the soap out of their eyes, which only rubs soap INTO their eyes. I remember thinking as they did that, "Why don't they just trust me, and keep looking up? If they do, they wouldn't get any soap in their eyes. They are trying their own way instead of trusting me." In that moment I realized God must sometimes ask the same thing about us. He says, "Look up! Trust me! I can remove the curse if you'll stop trying!"

Isaac Watts knew his Bible. He wrote, "No more let sin and sorrow grow; or thorns infest the ground. He comes to make His blessings flow; Far as the curse is found." And that curse of sin is worldwide. Thorns grow on every continent except Antarctica. In Genesis 3 God pronounced that part of the curse of sin was that thorns and thistles would grow and infest the ground. Thorns represent the broken relationship between God and man. And then when Abraham was getting ready to sacrifice Isaac, there was a Ram caught in—guess what? Thorns. The ram that became a substitute for Isaac was literally wearing a crown of thorns. And then 2,000 years after Mt. Moriah, what was Jesus wearing as He walked up another part of Mt. Moriah? A crown of thorns. And 2,000 years later, we realize that in wearing that crown and dying on that cross takes away the curse of sin.

I love "Joy to the World" by Isaac Watts, but I love another song he wrote because it tells "the rest of the story." It's not merely the babe in the manger who removes our curse; it was the Lamb

of God on the cross who saves us. In 1707 he wrote these powerful words: When I survey the wondrous cross; On which the Prince of Glory died; My richest gain I count but loss,

And pour contempt on all my pride. See, from his head, his hands, his feet, Sorrow and love flow mingled down. Did e'er such love and sorrow meet, Or thorns compose so rich a crown? Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were an offering far too small;

Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all. (This final verse that never made it into our hymnals.) To Christ, who won for sinners grace; By bitter grief and anguish sore, Be praise from all the ransomed race ; Forever and forevermore!

How far is the curse found? It's universal, but thank God, so is His grace. Romans 5:20 says, "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." (KJV) The curse is worldwide, but the Bible says that God can remove our sins as far as the East is the from the West!"

Will you stop your religious trying, and start trusting God to save you today?

## OUTLINE

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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes