

## GALATIANS 3: 25 - 4: 11

The idea that there are larger influences in our lives and our world (powers or spirits) that determine much of what we think, desire and do, is not one we North Americans accept easily. We prefer to think we have the power and freedom to choose and shape our lives on our own. Paul, however, believes that we must place ourselves under the right influences or else we will be subject to the wrong ones - Christ and Christ's Spirit or else, the spirits and powers of the world such as sin and the law.

The difference between sin and the law, however, is significant. Sin is a power destructive of self, others and the world. It stands against love and the spirit of love. The law, on the other hand (the Mosaic law), is a tool of God for keeping religious people mindful of their human frailty and imperfection, as well as recognizing the destructive power of sin. By setting up a standard of conduct, it reminds us of what is right and wrong, and at the same time, where and how often we fall short of the standard. The law, however, cannot influence or inspire the human heart to love. And more than this, the law can become a hindrance and block to faith, especially if it becomes a standard of who is acceptable to God and who is not. Believing you're ok according to the law is a denial of the belief that only by Christ's faithfulness you are saved, not your own. Moreover, it encourages a dishonesty about your own imperfections and a judgmental spirit toward the imperfections of others. As human beings we tend to underestimate our imperfections and overestimate the imperfections of others, especially those we don't like.

Paul's greatest concern by far, however, is to show that now that Christ has come and believers have established their identity as united in spirit with Christ, the law has only relative usefulness. It can point to right and wrong, but it has no power to change the human heart. Believing in Christ and receiving Christ into oneself, however, has the power to unleash his Spirit into the human heart, making a person more loving. It activates the conscience, and it establishes the law's spiritual demands deep in our souls. Believing in Christ is by far the better way of fulfilling the law's demands from the inside, than is a listing of its requirements on the outside.

Paul also uses the language of the law as a disciplinarian as well as a guardian. Children need a different kind of care and attention than do adults. Children need to learn responsibility through some measure of discipline and guidance. As adults, they internalize responsibility (if they are taught well and shaped by love), and its requirements arise from within. So it is for Paul. Christ having passed through our childhood (so to speak), has submitted himself to the law like any ordinary human being, and received the sentence of sin. But by his faithful fulfilment of the law without sin, he somehow, mysteriously, has taken on the world's sin and cancelled its destructive, enslaving power over those who can now trust his faithfulness as sufficient for themselves.

The response of those who are now, through Christ's faithfulness, adopted as full-fledged children of God (adults, so to speak), is to offer gratitude and call upon God in faith. The prayerful exclamation: Abba! Father! Reflects the unity between Jew and Gentile in this faith. 'Abba' is the Aramaic (Jewish) equivalent of 'Father' (Greek and Gentile). The higher unity of all peoples in Christ surpasses the divisive tendency of subjection to the law or any other power of the world. Love unites people while sin divides them. The law, unfortunately, is also becoming a source of division in the churches of Paul's day, as those who adhere to its details (such as circumcision for males, what to eat and how to prepare meals in a Kosher way, etc) are held above those who do not.