

Sermon Draft

Text: Galatians 3:23–29

Sermon: “In Christ”

January 1 was first celebrated as the festival of the Circumcision of Our Lord in the sixth century in Gaul and Spain. By the eleventh century, the festival was also being observed in Rome and from there spread throughout Christendom. The festival, with the shortest Gospel of the year (only one verse!), presents the circumcision of Christ on the eighth day after his birth, and thus was seen as appropriate for celebration on the eighth day after Christmas.

While the theme of the new year was not originally part of the festival (since the beginning of the civil year was reckoned differently from place to place and time to time), it fits well with the new year celebration. Besides the circumcision account (Luke 2:21), the Epistle and the Collect all also focus on the relation of the Old Covenant to the New. The Old Testament Reading (the most modern addition to today’s festival) sets forth the Aaronic Benediction an appropriate blessing for the new year.

The Epistle (Galatians 3:23–29) continues a section in which the apostle is refuting the arguments of the “false apostles,” who had led the Galatians astray (3:19–22). The false apostles’ argument was extremely plausible to new Bible-believing Christians: since the Law of Moses (Genesis–Deuteronomy) is God’s Word, what the Law of Moses says (including ceremonies of the Old Covenant like circumcision) must be performed in order for a person to be saved. Paul was thus faced with a difficult task: maintaining the truth and divine origin of the Law of Moses while essentially saying that it no longer applies to Christians, and yet part of it (the moral law) still does apply to Christians, but not as a means of salvation.

It is the end of a year and the beginning of a new one. Our thoughts may be on the past year and its joys, sorrows, accomplishments, and sins, or on the year ahead and our hopes for it. It doesn’t matter that this date is somewhat arbitrary for reckoning a new year, or that calendars have changed in human history. At least this day reminds us of the passing of time. Pagans come to this day, and sometimes lament and curse the year past for their unhappiness, and they hope to be happy in the year to come.

Christians, however, should use this day to remember that their days and years are in God's hands, to give thanks for his blessings in the past year, to repent of their past sins, and to pray for God's future blessing. It is a good night and a good day for us Christians.

The Epistle for today has nothing to do with the New Year. It does, however, say something about today's festival, the Circumcision and Name of Our Lord. On the eighth day after his birth, our Lord was given the name Jesus and was circumcised, in order to fulfill the Law of Moses. Now here in Galatians 3, Paul is writing against false apostles, who were teaching that in order to be saved, you have to keep the Law of Moses, particularly the ceremony of circumcision. Is circumcision still an obligation for Christians? If so, are Christians obligated to obey the Law of Moses in all its aspects: the Ten Commandments, dietary laws, circumcision, and the like?

Those false apostles had a pretty strong argument. Jesus was circumcised, after all. And God commanded circumcision to Abraham and had it written down by Moses. Circumcision was the sacramental sign of God's people.

So, if the non-Jewish people, the Gentiles, want to be saved, they would have to join God's people, and that would mean they have to become Jewish and be circumcised. They would have to keep the Law of Moses. That's how their argument ran. It's an attractive argument, and even in our day, some Christians think the same thing. But it's completely wrong. It makes salvation dependent on our performance of the Law of Moses, and takes away salvation as God's free gift. So, Paul argues against the false apostles, and Galatians is Paul's masterpiece, in which he demotes the Law of Moses and proves that salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ, not through the works of the Law.

“The Law of Moses” is what I've been saying. That's the phrase. When Lutherans say “Law,” they usually mean the eternal will of God for our behavior, which functions as a curb, mirror, and rule, and which is written in the hearts of mankind. That is, we usually mean the moral law of God, which is also the natural law. But in the Bible, “Law” often means the Law of Moses in the broad sense—the first five books of the Old Testament. “Law” in the broad sense is how the false apostles at Galatia were using the word “Law”: everything that God spoke to Moses, that's the Law.

It includes the eternal, moral law, the ceremonies of the tabernacle, and the civil ordinances of ancient Israel. And that brings us to Paul's main point.

The Law of Moses is not the way of salvation. Instead, it points you to the way of salvation. Paul's main point was in Gal 2:15–16. These are his words there: “We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.”

In chapter 3, then, he proves what he said, both from Scripture and from the experience of the Galatians. But the false apostles had a strong argument: “The Law of Moses was given by God; therefore you have to do it.” Yes, says St. Paul, God gave it, and it is holy and good, but only if you use it the right way. The Law of Moses was never meant to be a way of salvation. Instead, it points you to the way of salvation. It does this in two ways: First, the Law of Moses has prophecies and types of Christ and of our salvation through faith in him—his life, death, and resurrection.

Second, the Law of Moses has the moral law, such as the Ten Commandments, which reveals our sin, and curses and damns all sinners. It shows us our need for Christ the Savior. So indeed the Law points to Christ, both by prophesying and by damning.

This is shown by the example of a “guardian,” or disciplinarian. In our Epistle, Paul gives this example of the right use of the Law. “Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian” (vs 23–25). The Law of Moses was our guardian, or disciplinarian. The Greek word is “paidagogos”, which is where we get the word “pedagogue.” It doesn’t mean a teacher of children, though. A pedagogue was a slave in charge of disciplining the sons. He would lead them to school and make sure they behaved, and if they didn’t, he would punish them. A pedagogue, a guardian, a disciplinarian—that’s what the Law was. It’s good, it’s given by God, but it was never meant to be a way of salvation for sinners. God set forth the Law through Moses to do the opposite: not to save, but to discipline, reveal sins, rebuke, curse, and damn.

By doing so, all our excuses are removed, and all we can do is confess ourselves guilty before the holy God and pray for forgiveness. The guardian points to the way of salvation. We cannot be saved by obeying the Law of Moses, because we cannot obey the Law of Moses perfectly.

Thanks be to God, you are now free from the guardian. Faith has come, that is, “the word of faith that we proclaim” (Rom 10:8). This proclamation has gone out into all the world. The message of Christ’s person and saving work has come to you, and through it, the Holy Spirit has created faith in your heart. So you are now free from the guardian. You’re not a little kid anymore; you have grown up in Christ. You are no longer under a guardian.

What does this mean? Two things. First, the ceremonial and civil laws of Israel are not applicable to Gentiles. They have served their purpose and are no longer in effect, now that faith has come. Second, even though the moral law, such as the Ten Commandments, is still God’s will for our behavior, as it always has been (forever and ever), its curse has been removed through Christ. Christ obeyed the Law perfectly, loved God perfectly, and shed his blood as an innocent sacrifice, the first blood of which was his circumcision.

Yes, today in Jesus' circumcision, we see a prefiguring of his blood being poured out on the cross. So you are no longer under the Law, under its curse. Instead, with the Holy Spirit within you, you now walk in the Law of the Lord (1 Corinthians 9:21), and in his Law, we are drawn and called to meditate day and night (Psalm 1:2).

Through Christ, we are free of the ceremonies, civil ordinances, and condemnation of the Law of Moses, but we as Christians do not set aside God's commands but walk in the Law of the Lord. Not under the Law, but in it, because you are in Christ, were baptized into Christ, and have put on Christ. You are free from the guardian, for faith has come.

Dearly beloved, in this new year of the Lord, be comforted by the kindness of him and give thanks to him, who became our Brother in the womb of the Virgin Mary and fulfilled the Law for us including circumcision, in order to establish our salvation securely. To him be glory forever.

Amen