

First Sunday in Christmas/December 27, 2020  
Galatians 4:4-7/The Fullness of Time  
Holy Spirit Lutheran Church  
Pastor Jerry Stobaugh

“... when the fullness of time had come...”

One of the difficult things about the Christian faith is the way the Law and the Gospel relate to one another. We have both, and both are true, and both are the will of God. But they appear contradictory. The Law threatens and condemns while the Gospel sets free, comforts, and seems to say the Law has nothing to say. Much of the New Testament is one explanation after another of the distinction and different uses of the two and how they relate. Human reason says they cannot both be true and valid, yet they are.

The difference between them is how they are used, and how we relate both to them and to God. There is an historical relationship between the Law and the Gospel, and in our uses of them, and there is a relationship distinction in how we relate to each. Both of them are summed up in our text by the distinction between slaves and sons. Once we were slaves, but now we are sons. The change happened in the fullness of time.

The first distinction drawn is the priority in time of the Law over the Gospel. Very simply put, mankind knew and understood the Law long before they clearly understood the Gospel. That doesn't mean Gospel wasn't around as long. It just means most people understood the law first. The Gospel actually popped out in Genesis 3:15, and then in the promise to Abraham.

I'm sure many, especially Jews, were wondering why the Law was around for so long, seemingly, before this Gospel. This Gospel

seemed to them to have superseded the Law and is nowhere near as stringent and demanding as the Law.

The answer, Paul writes, is in the plan and timing of God. The Law was a manager until the time of the Gospel. There was really no difference between the two as to how one received salvation, at least not after Adam and Eve sinned. Salvation was by grace through faith even in Old Testament times. The Law was part of the plan of God to teach men about God's nature and about the sort of faithfulness God expected before the Gospel came. The arrival of the Gospel happened when the fulness of time came.

We know when Jesus was born the world was remarkably united under Rome. There was easy travel from one area to another throughout the known world. There was one common language, everyone had their own home language, of course, but the marketplace spoke Greek in every land. Europe and Asia, the Mediterranean and the middle east were all trading and talking to one another. There was generally civil peace, and some had come to doubt there were actually a great number of gods, although they generally believed there must be some sort of God. We see that belief in Acts, in the altar to the unknown God which Paul mentions in His Mars Hill sermon.

At just the right time, God sent His Son into the world. World conditions and the hearts of men were just right for the rapid spread of the Gospel. Were those conditions what God was waiting for? We don't know. We can see the conditions, and speculate, but we cannot say what was in the mind and plan of God. We just know it was the right time, according to God's timetable.

The Law had kept Israel. It had preserved God's Word. It had preserved a people who knew God after a fashion, a people scattered

throughout the Roman world. They were like kindling, a small but fiercely religious group who understood something about God, even though they didn't always know Him well. But many of them wanted to, and hungered for the salvation their Messiah would bring.

The Jews knew the kindness and the severity of God. They knew what God meant by faithfulness. The believers among them knew obedience to the Law was a reflection of love for God, not a slavish and fear-driven obedience. They knew about sin, and understood forgiveness. They also could conceive of God as intimate, personal with them, and utterly dependable, unlike the pagan, distant, capricious deities of Rome and the rest of the pagan world.

The Law taught right and wrong, good and evil, God-pleasing and God-angering. The appearance of holiness, what Paul calls the elemental things of the world and what we often refer to as "pietism", self-denial, do not eat, do not taste, do not touch, and outward forms of piety had become the witness and the measure of one's sincerity and devotion. This all was training.

We need that same training. That is why we teach the Law. We teach it to our children so they can understand. We teach them the lessons of the Old Testament so they can learn and know what God is like, and how precise and exacting He is. We teach them to know His power, and His wisdom, His mercy and reliability by teaching the great stories of the saints of Old Testament times. That was when God revealed those qualities, and showed Himself in ways He does not use often, anymore. Now He reveals Himself through His Word. He did what He did then, so we could see it and comprehend it now.

We teach His Law so we and our children have a sense of right and wrong, and know what God demands of us. Human life is less sweet and less valued where the sense of what is right and wrong is weak or

absent. The Bible teaches us Satan has his goal the destruction of the works of God. Violence, destruction and insecurity dominate where ethics are subjective, situational and very personal, meaning those places and situations in which people feel perfectly justified doing whatever they wish at any moment.

The Law not only teaches us just how sinful we really are but also prepares us to hear about forgiveness, and understand how truly great it is. Forgiveness of sins does not mean anything to someone who feels perfectly justified in all they do. You need to sense your guilt, to recognize your sins and to believe their power to destroy you and all you hold dear. When one knows they need it is the only time salvation is powerful and important to anyone.

The Law shows our need for His salvation and train our hearts for what He was planning to do for us. He then proclaims His love, and tells us how He rescued us in the Gospel. With the Gospel, He pours out His Holy Spirit into our hearts to create faith, and to teach us how to call upon Him as we ought to, as lost children crying out for their fathers “Abba,” the familiar form of the Aramaic word for Father, e.g. “Daddy!” Or, as the text reads, “Father!”

When the time was right God sent His Son to be born of a woman. He was born of a woman so He would be fully human and obligated to keep the Law of God or die, just as we are. That’s what born under the Law, means. He had to be under both the curse, and promise of the Law, and then earn the promise.

In the great exchange, He exchanged what He deserved for what we deserve. Because He is the very Son of God, He is of such value His life and His death are more significant and valuable than all of creation together. But He needed to be fully human to actually earn life to exchange with us. Having redeemed us, He now pours out

grace, forgiveness and life upon all those for whom He died. But only those who have faith in the life and work of Christ, receive what He won for all and pours out for all.

Those who are baptized, who receive faith and a new heart in Baptism, where the Holy Spirit is poured out on us, and where we are claimed by God and where we receive the adoption as sons, so that we can cry, by the power of the Spirit, Abba! Father! And having been adopted into the family of God, as brothers of Jesus Christ, we are now children of God. We are no longer slaves under the Law and in danger, but children of God, beloved of our Father, and free from sin, guilt, condemnation, and fear. In fact, we are heirs, to inherit along with Jesus all that the Father has in store for Him, glory and life and the love God!

You no longer need to weigh your behavior to know if you will go to heaven, or look at your circumstances here and now to know if God loves you. Look to the cross of Jesus Christ to measure the love of God for you, listen to His promises to judge your hope of salvation. The Law is still here, and it is still true, and God expects you to abide by it. But you live by it willingly, as children who love their Father and wish to please Him, not as those who are afraid if they fail, God will curse them for all eternity! Live as those whose life is assured, and God accomplished all of this for you, in the fullness of time.