

- 21 Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law?  
22 For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a free-woman.  
23 But he *who was* of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman *was* by promise.  
24 Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar.  
25 For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children.  
26 But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all.  
27 For it is written, Rejoice, *thou* barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband.  
28 Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise.  
29 But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him *that was born* after the Spirit, even so *it is* now.  
30 Nevertheless what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman  
31 So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free.

The question here is this: who are the children of God? This passage is rich in imagery and meaning. We also must be sober and diligent and not go beyond what Scripture has said here.

There are a few principles that must be laid down here before we can continue, to insure that we see the true meaning of this passage.

1. God is the same in all ages and cannot deny Himself. He created all things for His own pleasure and glory, and it has always been His requirement that we love Him with all our hearts, souls, strength, and mind. Similarly, because He cannot deny Himself, God requires that love be showed to His image, man, and we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. This will never change. This is the law of nature that is written on the hearts of every man, according to Romans 2. This is true of all men, and this is the law that all men will be judged by in the last day. It is impossible and a contradiction to think that God will ever settle for anything less than perfect love for Him and for His image. This the scripture clearly teaches in Romans 2.
2. Because God is the Creator and Sustainer of all things, love toward Him by the men must have obedience as its very essence, as Jesus said, “If ye love me, keep my commandments.” The apostle John also said, “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous.”
3. However, the first man and woman upon the earth failed in the test concerning the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Adam and Eve departed from obedience and from the love of God and listened to the voice of the Devil, speaking through the serpent. They fell into sin and came under the curse of the law. This curse included banishment from Paradise, the curse and corruption of their posterity, and physical and eternal death.
4. God did not immediately destroy Adam and Eve, although He would have been perfectly justified in doing so. Instead, because He had purposes of grace and salvation in Jesus Christ, He gave Adam and Eve a promise. The promise was that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent—and by so doing remove the curse of sin and death. This was a promise and no condition was attached to it—the coming of Christ into the world to take away sin did not depend upon the approval of faith of men. The gift of Christ to the world was free, out of the love and grace of God.

5. Because salvation was to come by the promised Seed, the law of nature was to play a different role in the life of man—it would become an instrument of the Promise. It could never make the Promise of no effect, as if men could gain from the law of nature what God had promised through Christ. Salvation would come through the promise and through the promise alone.

With the above principles in mind, let us look at the passage before us.

- I. The history of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac; along with Sarah and Hagar, and especially Moses.
  - A. The call of Abraham and the narrowing of the scope of the Promise: Messiah. Circumcision was a sign of the promised seed who would be not born of the flesh, but of the promise through the Spirit.. Abraham received the promise of life and righteousness because of faith in the Promise of Christ.
  - B. The birth of Ishmael: son of the flesh. Of Hagar the bondservant. Ishmael represents those who are born of the flesh, those who trust their own works.
  - C. The birth of Isaac by a miracle of Sarah, a child of the promise. Abraham and Sarah were instruments, but it was not because of their natural strength.
  - D. The persecution of Ishmael: mocking Isaac. The casting out of Ishmael by Abraham.
- II. The giving of the law from Sinai. As Witsius says, it could not properly be called a covenant of works, for no man could ever be saved by that covenant which Adam had broken. But the Ten Commandments were given as an instrument with respect to the Promise.
  - A. The promise is only effective if it is received by faith, which is the work of the Holy Spirit in terms of the atonement of Jesus Christ. But the Holy Spirit was only given in a limited way to Israel. As we read in Deuteronomy 5:29 O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them, and with their children for ever! Deuteronomy 29:4 Yet the LORD hath not given you an heart to perceive, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, unto this day.

Without the gift of the Holy Spirit, the law was a covenant of sin and death, of hardness of heart and faithlessness and self-righteousness. Something better would come with Jesus Christ, for the promise of Messiah included the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, not only upon Israel, but upon the whole world. The question is not: “Does God require us to love Him?” for that is beyond question. The true question is “How are we to attain the love of God.” The answer is, “Not by the flesh, but by the Spirit. Not by obedience, but by faith. Not by not sinning, but by the forgiveness of sins. Not by law, but by mercy.”

- B. Within Abraham’s household, therefore, were two manner of seed: a natural seed that could not escape the curse of sin and death; and the seed of the promise: the elect in Jesus Christ.
  - C. How galling this would have been to the Jew—to think that in the eyes of God he was no better than the Ishmaelite, whom he despised. To equate Hagar with Sinai and with Jerusalem was a bitter pill almost too much to bear.
- III. The law, then, was given from Sinai in two tables of Stone for this is the heart of the subject before us. This was a promulgation of the law of nature, requiring us to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and our neighbors as ourselves.
  - A. The law was a curse, if men did not believe in the Promise. The law requires nothing less than total perfection—as our catechism says. We must present to him perfect obedience or make satisfaction for the sins we have committed: either by ourselves or by another.
  - B. Christ was not so clearly revealed in the law of Moses, but Israel should not have been unaware of the Promise to Adam and Eve and to Abraham and of many other things. Why were they so hardened as to not see something tremendous in Melchizedek paying tithes to Abraham? To those to whom the Spirit was given, the inheritance of Abraham, life and righteousness, was given by faith. Israel

did not receive the righteousness of God, as Paul tells us in Roman, because they sought it not by faith. Some did and were blessed with faithful Abraham. But those who received it did not seek it by their own righteousness, but in terms of the Promise of God—that is, by faith.

- C. The purpose of the law was two-fold: First, to teach Israel’s about God’s eternal and unchanging requirements of love to Him and to each other. Second, to bring conviction of sin, so that they might seek eternal life as Abraham had sought it—by faith in the promise and not according to the flesh.
- D. The Ten Commandments, therefore, in one respect are a covenant of death—a covenant of works that have been broken and bring a curse to those who hope to be justified therein. But they might also be considered a means of the covenant of grace—if the Holy Spirit brings convictions of sin, and drives us to Jesus Christ, where true righteousness might be found. So they can be a blessing or a curse— a blessing if they humble us in the Spirit; a curse if energized by fleshly pride.

IV. Ishmael and Isaac become symbols of two administrations of God’s revelations to us.

- A. Ishmael: Those who seek eternal life by their own works. Their religious ideas are born of their own strength—born of the flesh, as Ishmael was. These were found in Israel, and they are found in the church. These are those who make an illegitimate use of the Covenant of Works or Nature. They disregard the curse that came upon Adam and Eve, the sinfulness of their own nature, and think that they can offer up to God their poor works as satisfaction for their sins. They think that they have within themselves the strength to love God and their neighbor. These lie under the curse of the law, their flesh is energized by the law, and they persecute the children of the promise, just as Ishmael did. To trust in your own works is to deny the curse upon man because of Adam’s sin, and to make light of the promise, as if Christ is dead in vain.
- B. Isaac: Those to whom eternal life is given by the promise, apart from their own works. In these the law works to drive them to Jesus Christ, for the Holy Spirit—not the flesh—teaches them that they have sinned and come short of the glory of God, and that they must seek salvation not in their own works, but in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. In the Gospel, Christ is set before them crucified, and they renounce their own works and trust in Christ alone for forgiveness for all their sins. They are children, then, not of the bondwoman, but of the free: they are the children of promise, the true seed of Abraham. They, therefore, make much of Christ and in beholding in the Scriptures the glory of Jesus Christ, they are changed into His image, not by the flesh, but by the mighty power of the Holy Spirit. For the first time, they become willing and able to truly live for Christ, for their lives are now lives of thankfulness and love. And so is fulfilled Romans 8:1-4.

1 ¶ *There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. 3 For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: 4 That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.*

Amen and Amen.