

opusdei.org

"We have received the grace of becoming children of God"

In his 18 August general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechesis on Saint Paul's Letter to the Galatians, speaking about the role of the commandments in the life of a Christian.

08/19/2021

Brothers and sisters, good morning!

Saint Paul, who loved Jesus and had clearly understood what salvation was, has taught us that the “children of the promise” (*Gal 4: 28*) – that is all of us, justified by Jesus Christ - are no longer bound by the Law, but are called to the demanding life-style of the freedom of the Gospel. The Law however exists. But there exists another way: the same Law, the Ten Commandments, but with another way, because it could no longer be justified by itself once the Lord had come. And therefore, in today’s catechesis I would like to explain this. And we ask: what, according to the Letter to the Galatians, is the role of the Law? In the passage we have heard, Paul says that the Law was like a *pedagogue*. It is a beautiful image, that of the pedagogue we spoke about during the last audience, an image that deserves to be understood in its correct meaning.

The Apostle seems to suggest that Christians divide the history of salvation in two parts, and also his personal story, There are two periods: before becoming believers in Christ Jesus and after receiving the faith. At the centre is the event of the death and resurrection of Jesus, which Paul preached in order to inspire faith in the Son of God, the source of salvation, and in Christ Jesus we are justified. Therefore, starting from faith in Christ there is a “before” and an “after” with regard to the Law itself, because the Law exists, the Commandments exist, but there is one attitude before the coming of Jesus, and another one afterwards. The previous history is determined by being “under the Law”. And one who followed the path of the Law was saved, justified; the subsequent history, after the coming of Jesus, was to be lived by following the Holy Spirit (cf. *Gal* 5:25). This is the first time that Paul

uses this expression: to be “*under* the Law”. The underlying meaning implies the idea of a negative servitude, typical of slaves: to be “under”. The Apostle makes it explicit by saying that when one is “under the Law” it is as if one is “watched” and “locked up”, a kind of preventive custody. This period, says Saint Paul, has lasted a long time – from Moses, to the coming of Jesus - and is perpetuated as long as one lives in sin.

The relationship between the Law and sin will be explained in a more systematic way by the Apostle in his Letter to the Romans, written a few years after the one to the Galatians. In summary, the Law leads to the definition of the transgression and to making people aware of their own sin: “You have done this, and so the Law – the Ten Commandments – say thus: you are in sin”. Or rather, as common experience teaches, the

precept ends up stimulating the transgression. In the Letter to the Romans he writes: “When we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the Law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive” (*Rom*, 7:5-6). Why? Because the justification of Jesus Christ has come. Paul succinctly expresses his vision of the Law: “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law” (*1 Cor* 15:56). A dialogue: you are under the law, and you are there with the door open to sin.

In this context, the reference to the pedagogical role played by the law makes full sense. But the Law is the pedagogue that leads you where? To Jesus. In the scholastic system of antiquity, the pedagogue did not have the function we attribute to him today, namely that of supporting the

education of a boy or a girl. At the time he was instead a slave whose task was to accompany the master's son to the teacher and then bring him home again. In this way he was to protect his ward from danger and watch over him to ensure he did not behave badly. His function was rather disciplinary. When the boy became an adult, the pedagogue ceased his duties. The pedagogue to whom Paul refers was not the teacher, but the one who accompanied his ward to school, who watched over the boy and brought him back home.

Referring to the Law in these terms enables Saint Paul to clarify the role it played in the history of Israel. The *Torah*, that is, the Law, was an act of magnanimity by God towards His people. After the election of Abraham, the other great act was the Law: laying down the path to follow. It certainly had restrictive functions,

but at the same time it had protected the people, it had educated them, disciplined them and supported them in their weakness, especially by protecting them from paganism; there were many pagan attitudes in those times. The Torah says: “There is only one God and He has set us on our way”. An act of goodness by the Lord. And certainly, as I said, it had restrictive functions, but at the same time it protected the people, it had educated them, it had disciplined them and it supported them in their weakness. And this is why the Apostle goes on to describe the phase of minor age. And he says: “Heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world” (*Gal 4: 1-3*).

In summary, the Apostle's conviction is that the Law certainly possesses a positive function – like the pedagogue in accompanying his ward - but it is a function that is limited in time. It cannot extend its duration too far, because it is linked to the maturation of individuals and their choice of freedom. Once one has come to faith, the Law exhausts its propedeutic value and must give way to another authority. What does this mean? That after the Law we can say, “We believe in Jesus Christ and do what we want?” No! The Commandments exist, but they do not justify us. What makes us just is Jesus Christ. The Commandments must be observed, but they do not give us justice; there is the gratuitousness of Jesus Christ, the encounter with Jesus Christ that freely justifies us. The merit of faith is receiving Jesus. The only merit: opening the heart. And what do we do with the Commandments? We

must observe them, but as an aid to the encounter with Jesus Christ.

This teaching on the value of the law is very important, and deserves to be considered carefully so we do not give way to misunderstandings and take false steps. It is good for us to ask ourselves if we still live in the period in which we need the Law, or if instead we are fully aware of having received the grace of becoming children of God so as to live in love. How do I live? In the fear that if I do not do this, I will go to hell? Or do I live with that hope too, with that joy of the gratuitousness of salvation in Jesus Christ? It is a good question. And also the second: do I disregard the Commandments? No. I observe them, but not as absolutes, because I know that it is Jesus Christ who justifies me.

pdf | document generated
automatically from [https://opusdei.org/
en-uk/article/we-have-received-the-
grace-of-becoming-children-of-god/](https://opusdei.org/en-uk/article/we-have-received-the-grace-of-becoming-children-of-god/)
(04/11/2026)