

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

The Apostle Paul's View of the Law

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New Testament Orientation II

by

Matthew McNutt

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Introduction

Paul's approach to the law is that of a pastor, with his points and application shaped by the unique congregations he addresses. While he recognized the law's usefulness as given by God, he also warns of the dangers in wrong application or understanding of the law and the damaging effects that could have on the faith. Paul's concern is not with the law itself – as given by God, and defined in the Torah, it is good. Instead, his concern is the wrong understanding of the law and its role in the life of the believer, both before and after Christ's arrival and ministry.

Paul saw the law as God's law, it was an expression of His will for man. As a Jewish man or woman, it was a tremendous privilege to have been born under the law because it identified them as part of the chosen people.¹ And yet, with the arrival of Christ, there was a new way. No longer were they bound to a system that was impossible to live up to. Now there was a way to finally be reconciled with God, a way that the law paved the way for and built a foundation for the salvation through Christ to be understood.

Over the course of the following passages, this paper will attempt to elaborate Paul's understanding of, and theology of, the law. From this the application for Christians in Paul's day, as well as today, will be explored.

Romans

Romans 2:12-16, Judgment and the Law

¹ F.F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, (Carlisle, Cumbria: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 189.

Paul begins this particular passage in a way that must have been shocking for the Jewish Christians reading it; he points out that everyone who has grown up without the law will be judged, and everyone who has grown up with the law will be judged, that in either case the result is the same: God's holiness is not satisfied. This is not referring to Gentiles as "lawless," the word used for criminals, but as having existed even as normal citizens living their lives without the Jewish law handed down by Moses.²

In other words, Paul is making the point that the law does not offer hope. It reveals sin. It can even lead to sin. But it does not present a path to God that is attainable; just like those without the law, those who have lived under it have lived under a system that does not bring about salvation in the way that Christ has done. Ultimately, the law does not lead to salvation, it leads to judgment. Either way, living with, or without the law, ends the same.

Romans 2:17-29, Limitations of the Law

By leading off with the word "but," Paul is making a direct contrast between the Jewish recipient and the Gentile who lived without the law. Paul seems to be taking up the very claims the Jews have been using against them in this passage.³ Yes, the Jew should be concerned with following God's law, but the problem is that the focus had been on works instead of faith. Paul goes on to make the point that none of these works matter if the heart is not aligned with God, or living out this life with a focus on faith.

² Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans (The New International Commentary On the New Testament)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 146.

³ C.E.B. Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary*, American ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), location 847.

The attitude Paul is describing here instead communicates an attitude of entitlement. Rather than depending on God, their faith is in their own works, which means they have failed the law and failed to live up to God's calling.⁴ Paul goes on to point out their hypocrisy; they claim one thing while doing another. His point? It does not matter if one falls under the law by birth, if they have not lived up to it than it will not save them. The limitations of the law are clear to Paul.

Paul uses two of the tenets the Jews would have held to dearly to make his point in this passage. By highlighting the limits of the law, he shocked them by suggesting those outside of the law may actually pursue it more effectively than the Jews have through their boasting. From there he goes after the second tenet; circumcision. Once again, he paints a picture that suggests their actions have made their circumcision worthless, while uncircumcised Gentiles have done a better job living out the life God has called them to, suggesting they have a circumcision of the heart.⁵

It is important to be careful to note here, however, that Paul is not suggesting that these Gentiles in a superior position have done so through a more successful pursuit of the law. That would imply that salvation is actually possible through the law. This is not the case; instead, Paul is highlighting that Gentiles have attained through faith in Christ what the Jews had been unable to attain through the law.⁶ This would have been shocking to the Jewish recipient, but underscores Christ's superiority to the Old Testament law.

4 Ibid, location 847.

5 Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 167.

6 Ibid, 171.

Paul concludes this passage by insinuating that the Gentile believers will condemn, or judge, the circumcised Jews. This was in direct contrast to a common belief amongst the Jews at the time that the Jews would sit in judgment over the Gentiles of the world.⁷ Is Paul suggesting that Gentile believers will actually sit in judgment? Most likely not; nowhere else in the Bible does scripture suggest any judge other than God. Instead, he is both correcting their incorrect assumption of their own status while pointing out that the Gentile believers' salvation further highlights their failure.

Romans 3:21-31, Justification by Faith

“And just as the entire Pauline gospel has its center in the death and resurrection of Christ, so also the gospel of justification by faith.”⁸ What Ridderbos sums up in this quotation is the essential of Paul's theology; that salvation is through Christ alone, and that through faith. Where Paul hints at it in earlier passages of Romans, he now begins to become much more direct in Christ's superiority to the law. At the same time, he also builds up the law's role in paving the way for Christ's arrival and man's understanding of salvation.

In 3:21, Paul makes the case that the righteousness here mentioned, delivered through faith in Christ, is actually attested to in the Old Testament through the law. In other words, to properly understand righteousness, one needs to understand the law and its support of Christ's work. According to Cranfield, this is “one of the great hinge-sentences on which the argument of the epistle turns.”⁹ The law was deeply involved in the gospel events; it painted the need for

⁷ Ibid, 173.

⁸ Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: an Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 166.

⁹ Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary*, location 1046.

salvation, communicated the importance of righteousness and human inability to achieve it through their own efforts, and Christ's fulfillment of those requirements on behalf of man.

Paul goes on to say that "all have sinned,"¹⁰ emphasizing once again that Jew and Gentile share the same fate without God, and share the same reward through faith. Using the language of the law, Paul directly connects the Old Testament teachings with the death and resurrection of Christ, describing God as presenting Christ as the ultimate sacrifice, through which all can be saved.

Verses 27-31 are a direct result of 21-26; with salvation being solely an act of God, the pride some once took in their supposed accomplishments with regards to the law are not relevant. Salvation is not connected to man's actions, leaving no room for bragging rights. Cranfield observes that some had mistakenly taken a view in the past through their bragging that ultimately put God in their debt; if salvation was through good works, then works put God in man's debt.¹¹ Instead, the opposite is true: all bragging rights belong to God as the sole author of man's salvation.

Building to the crescendo of his argument for faith, begun in chapter one, Paul states unequivocally that God is the God of Jew and Gentile, and that He makes them right through faith alone. Does this conflict then with the law? No! Instead he claims that "we uphold the law."¹² Cranfield explains it this way; Paul is again making the point that the law paved the way

10 Romans 3:23.

11 Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary*, location 1167.

12 Romans 3:31.

for Christ's arrival and work of salvation. In fact, from Paul's view "the law supports and confirms the doctrine of faith."¹³ The two are not opposed, the one fulfills the other.

Romans 7:1-25, Freedom from Bondage to the Law

Romans 7:1-25 represents the last major discourse on the law in the epistle to the Romans. It has triggered much debate over the centuries as scholars try to reconcile the strong comments Paul makes with regards to the law.¹⁴ He makes two basic points in this passage; the first is that the bondage to the law must be broken for a relationship with Christ to begin.¹⁵ He uses the analogy of marriage to make this point, describing how a woman who marries another while her husband is alive is an adulteress, but a widow who remarries has done no wrong. The first relationship must end for the second to begin. It may be a subtle reference to the transitioning from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant Christ spoke of at the last supper.¹⁶

Paul has already affirmed the value of the law in earlier passages, however, which means this does not mean the death of the law. Paul sees the law fulfilled and completed in Christ with all authority given to Him in His death and resurrection. It does refer to the authority of the law, though, in that it cannot share authority with Christ over the believers. The authority of the law over people's lives must be severed for the believer to be able to have a relationship with Christ.¹⁷

¹³ Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary*, location 1207.

¹⁴ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 409.

¹⁵ Ibid, 409.

¹⁶ Matthew 26:28.

¹⁷ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 409.

The second basic point of chapter seven is that while the law originated from God, and as such is good, it has become the unintended tool of sin.¹⁸ It was given to draw people closer to God, but instead had become a burden that kept people from God. The challenge is in reconciling something of God, the law, which as Paul asserts throughout chapter seven is good, with Paul's claim that the law caused him to sin. Can something good have such a result?

In many ways, it is the same struggle found in the Garden of Eden with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. On the one hand, as chapter seven reveals, the law exposes sin. Through learning the law, right and wrong are defined and the way of holiness made clear. And yet, that knowledge, once attained, is death to man just as it was for Adam and Eve. Paul's lament throughout this passage is poignant, revealing the struggle all mankind has with this knowledge. On the one hand, the desire to pursue God is there, yet the sinful nature delights at the knowledge of ways to sin not previously known or understood.

The law is good. And yet, no one has come to know the Father through it. Paul pleads with the readers to sever their dependence, their bondage to it in favor of this new, perfect fulfillment of what God had promised. Through Christ's perfect work, what man could never attain on his own efforts is now attainable through Christ's effort.

Galatians

Galatians 3:7-14, From Curse to Blessing

From the tone of the letter, it is clear that Paul is writing in response to Judaizers, hence his frequent mentioning of Abraham. For the legalistic ones putting their confidence in the law

¹⁸ Ibid, 409.

and in their heritage, their descent from Abraham is what gives them their perceived authority. But Paul changes the discussion by making the point that Abraham was to bless all nations – not just the Jewish nation, and that Abraham did so by faith not works.

Paul must have shocked his audience through labeling the law a curse in verse 10, using Deuteronomy to support his claim. While he does not go into in depth, Paul is working on the assumption that they know it is impossible to observe the law completely, thus resulting in the Deuteronomic curse.¹⁹ He continues to make his case from the Old Testament by quoting Habakkuk 2:4 regarding the need to live by faith. He also cites Leviticus and Deuteronomy (a second time) as he continues to lay out his argument that the law is impossible to satisfy, that the message of the scriptures has always been salvation through faith, now fully revealed in Christ and His perfect sacrifice.

While at first glance it may appear that Paul is labeling the law a curse in this passage, that is not the case. His belief continues to be that the law, given by God, is good. However, his point, much like in Romans, is that it is impossible for fallen man to live up to every part of the law which results in being under the curse as promised by the law. In other words, “Paul demonstrates that while faith is the way to blessing (vv. 7-9) the law, as a principle diametrically opposed to faith and not based on faith, can never bring justification.”²⁰ Ultimately, this results in the followers of God being able to move from being cursed under the law, to blessed under the promise given through Abraham and delivered in Christ through faith.

¹⁹ Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians (The New International Commentary On the New Testament)*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 142.

²⁰ Ibid, 146.

Galatians 3:19-22, Purpose of the Law

F.F. Bruce points out that Paul's question of why the law was given at all is answered in two parts; to multiply transgressions, and to confine mankind in a prison of sin with no escape other than faith.²¹ Once again, the themes from Romans are repeated as Paul makes the point that in revealing sin, the law exposes behavior perhaps not realized to be sin as well as inspires the sin nature to commit sin it may not have desired to do otherwise.

One possible interpretation of the reference to the mediator is to clarify that normally when something is entrusted to a mediator, it is a two sided arrangement with responsibilities for action on both sides. Paul's clarification here that God is One makes the point that this is unlike most mediator relationships in that salvation is a one-sided affair; God saves us through Christ in spite of our inability to live up to the righteous standards of the law.²²

Paul concludes this section by once again affirming the validity of the law. Knowing one of the natural reactions readers may have to his letter is to think he is suggesting the law is opposed to God, or somehow sinful itself – and as something given by God, that would be a dangerous label to give it, Paul addresses it.²³ The law is God's law, therefore it is good.

The law “serves as God's instrument to accomplish his purpose.”²⁴ There is a positive aspect to it in that it is a part of God's plan for mankind, demonstrated in verse 22. Using the metaphor of a prison, Paul writes that the entirety of scripture, which was the law, has contained

21 F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians (The New International Greek Testament Commentary)* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 175.

22 Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 162.

23 Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 180.

24 Ibid, 180.

sin with no possibility of escape. Man is a prisoner, with no possibility of escape through his own efforts – the only escape being the promise given to Abraham, fulfilled through faith in Christ.²⁵

Galatians 4:21-31, Evidence from the Law

In chapter four, Paul uses what must have been a shocking illustration to make his point about the superiority of Christ to the law using the story of Hagar and Sarah. As Jews, they took great pride in their status as descendants of Abraham and his son Isaac, the children of promise, divinely chosen by God. And yet, in this passage Paul flips their understanding and compares those to hold to the law with Hagar and her son. In other words, Paul sees the same battle taking place again; between reliance on self through the law and reliance on God through the promise in Christ.²⁶

Paul makes it clear that he is not bringing out some new meaning intended by the Old Testament author, instead, he is using a real life example to help them understand the spiritual reality they were facing in his time. For his purposes, the two women represent the two covenants. Hagar represents the law given at Sinai, producing children for bondage as a children of a slave-wife were meant to be. Meanwhile, Sarah, a free woman, represents the new covenant in Christ, whose children are true heirs and rise above.²⁷

Hagar and her son persecuted Sarah and her son, and as a result were cast out. Paul is making the same point here; the unbelieving Jews still clinging to the law and legalism will be

²⁵ Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 166.

²⁶ Ibid, 206.

²⁷ Ibid, 207.

rejected by God much like Hagar and her son were. Paul's illustration is a dire warning to the Judaizers troubling the Galatians.

Galatians 5:1-6, Freedom for the Church from the Law

Paul begins his appeal to the readers to grab on to the freedom that comes from Christ in chapter 5. Paul actually begins this thought in 4:31 with his phrase, "you see then ...", identifying that what follows is based on what has preceded. Therefore the freedom referenced is freedom from the burden of the law.

The "yoke" referred to in "yoke of slavery," spoke of the teaching of the law. During that time, a set of teaching would be thought of as a yoke, consequently, when someone would accept a teaching or set of beliefs, they would then take on that yoke of teaching upon themselves.²⁸ By using this language, Paul is directly telling them to reject the teaching of the Judaizers. His language communicates what he thinks of it; it is a burden, it is slavery, it is contrary to Christ.

In verse 3, the problem is not in the act of circumcision itself – otherwise, countless individuals even today would be troubled by this passage. The problem is in where their faith is being placed by following through that act at that time. As part of the law, if the motive in being circumcised was to fulfill a perceived requirement to be saved than faith was being put in the law, not Christ's atoning work on the cross. Paul's point? As Christians they have put their faith in Christ, why would they then put their faith in something else instead? They will have allowed themselves to reenter slavery even though they are heirs to the kingdom!

²⁸ Ibid, 217.

Finally, Paul sums it all up in verse six making the point that “the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” It seems to break Paul’s heart that they could be forgetting this simple truth and turning a joyful pursuit of God back into something that is a burden and hardship through the unattainable demands of the law.

Conclusion

Reconciling Paul’s Theology

At first glance, the reader may think that Paul has conflicting views on scripture, the law and grace. In some passages he refers to the law as good, in others he rejects it and speaks of its influence to sin. And yet, with closer examination it becomes clear that there is no conflict in Paul’s theology of the law. As demonstrated throughout this paper, Paul consistently views the law as something created by God, and as such good. It is a limited precursor to the arrival of Christ. It defines sin and holiness, and while an impossible standard for any human to live up to it does demonstrate clearly the requirements of God’s righteousness.

With Christ’s arrival, what was impossible – man being good enough to satisfy God’s demands – became possible, and through His redemption and perfect sacrifice, there is no longer any need to put trust in an imperfect system. Paul’s contention then is that the law, as intended – a tool for identifying and revealing man’s inability to save himself or meet God’s standards – is no longer needed as Christ both reveals man’s inability to save himself and provides the salvation through His sacrifice so desperately needed.

Paul’s frustration with the law is not in the law itself, because a proper understanding of it is still useful. His frustration is with believers still relying on a legalistic, imperfect model to

define righteous living and Godly lifestyle. He argues that that is an impossible challenge that man has been released from, and that clinging to it ultimately is trusting in it for salvation rather than God.

Application for the Believer

The application for the believer today is just as relevant as it was two thousand years ago. Human nature loves checklists; having righteous behavior defined and categorized gives something tangible that Christians find themselves inclined to grab on to. However, this has the danger to become legalistic. Putting emphasis on traditions rather than scripture, creating rules, trusting in good behavior and righteous standing compared to those around them – all of these are the same traps the Judaizers fell into two thousand years ago.

Faith can never be placed in one's own efforts. Man is incapable of being righteous by his own merit. Understanding that brings both a humility and an incredible freedom to pursue God without the pressure of satisfying others demands.

Knowing and understanding the law is still valuable. The Old Testament provides the foundation for understanding God's holiness and perfect demands, as well as man's complete and utter reliance on God for salvation. While the Judaizers emphasized the law to their detriment then, the temptation for many today is to ignore the law altogether – which would reject Paul's assertion that it is of God, therefore it is good!

In 2 Timothy 2:15, when Paul challenged Timothy to study, he was directing him to the scriptures, which at that time was the Old Testament. The application with regards to the law for

believers today is to put faith solely in Christ for salvation, and to know the scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, they are of God, and as such good and useful for faith.

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