

THINKING ABOUT THE “LAW”

The concept of “law” is alluded to often in the Old and New Testaments. The words *torah* (H), *mishpat* (H), *mitzvah* (H) and *chuggah* (H) are frequently interpreted as “law,” “judgments/ordinances,” “commandments” and “statutes” respectively. *Nomos* (G) or *entole* (G) depict the New Testament expressions for “law” or “commandments.”

Often ignored is the fact that the existence of any law implies a judicial system must be in place. Through these divine laws God requires certain standards of conduct in worship and daily living. In turn, such rules intimate consequences for those acting at variance to His regulations.

The laws that God gave to mankind fall into broad functional categories:

1. Moral codes that were finally placed in stone by the finger of God – the Decalogue.
2. Worship standards that were:
 - a. Typical – awaiting the antitypical Messiah.
 - b. Personal adoration or liturgical expressions, such as in prayer, singing and meditation.
3. Civil/judicial rules that were enforced by religious leaders within, first, the patriarchal system, later priests, and still later kings and judges (this covered a vast array of regulations from health to commerce).
4. Special rules and celebrations commemorating God’s covenant promises to restore man to holiness.

Challenging Bible students has been the significant issue of what standards ended at the Cross, and which remain as divine requirements. Prejudice often drives interpretation of those laws. Much of Paul’s writings are devoted to orienting Christians between the standards of “Mosaic laws” and the deeper understanding of God’s moral laws reflected through Christ’s righteousness.

This was clearly shown in his letter to the Galatians:

- *“Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster”* (Galatians 3:24-25).
- That Mosaic Law was a guide to ancient peoples. When Christ came, the “law of faith” (Romans 3:27) came in. Man’s relationship to the “former law” changed. The Cross opened the door for a more personal tie to God. Tangible faith became a unique key to the very righteousness of Jesus.

Still driven by unyielding debate is a lingering concern: “Which law(s) transitioned into the faith system?” The Bible isn’t always immediately clear, especially in the Book of Romans, **unless** there is a careful review of context and thoughts.

Most “laws” are defined as relating either to the Decalogue or to statutes, judgments and ordinances that governed the lives of believers. Some expositors attempt to codify parts of the

Mosaic system on equal grounds with the Decalogue. That is at variance with how they were given and the distinct message Christ conveyed to the Pharisee lawyer in Matthew 22:35-40. The great law that *all* other regulations depend on, even accede to, is the Decalogue. A distinct line is drawn in the New Testament between statutes in support of the moral law (Decalogue) and those that governed the previous theocracy.

Christ noted that *“If ye love me, keep my commandments”* (John 14:15). Those “love related” commandments are morally based. Later, John embellished this by writing:

- I John 2:3: *“And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.”*
- I John 5:3: *“For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous.”*

Paul elevated this understanding of obedience by writing *“For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified”* (Romans 2:13). John noted in the Apocalypse that the saints – those who will be saved – *“keep the commandments”* (Revelation 12:17). There *is* a standard that infiltrates New Testament thought.

Describing this more deeply, John noted: *“Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him”* (I John 3:6).

A divine law is here implied that is associated with a legally binding system. The Biblical term for behavior out of its bounds is “sin.” Since the issue of sin is a moral matter. It would be Decalogue-based. Thus, there is a remedy for such a law-breaker.

- *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (I John 1:9).
- *“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin”* (I John 1:7).

When these legal steps are used, Paul says:

- *“For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace”* (Romans 6:14).
- There is no condemnation at that point from the law because we have come under God’s grace (His cleansing blood, mediated by the Holy Spirit). *“There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit”* (Romans 8:1).

All these regulations relate to the Decalogue or any statute that clarifies its honor and holiness. They reflect moral norms that are timeless, alluding to the elevated precepts the lawyer and Christ shared. We know this by the many references that are given to all ten in the New Testament (i.e., Matthew 19:18-19, Romans 13:8-10, Matthew 24:20, Hebrews 4:9, Revelation 10:6). That law defines sin, which can be cleansed by the “blood of the Lamb.”

The Dilemma – What do we do with all the “non-moral” laws?

The study of God’s “desire for man” is elevating. In Romans a careful analysis shows that Paul is promoting Jesus as a personal Savior to those still following a “law-oriented life,” still

struggling with the Mosaic system! If they stubbornly resist, he frequently calls them Judaizers. Invariably, these are renegade worshipers and leaders promoting observance of segments of that Mosaic Law, which shattered the wonders of the Cross.

There are two distinct places where Paul especially addresses these issues. From them we can get rich insight into the deeper concerns of God's moral, and in turn, legal, standards today. Galatians and Colossians are gold mines of thought in the great transition between the Jewish theocracy and the Christian era.

The Galation Message

Perhaps Paul's best summation thought:

- *“Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.... Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace”* (Galatians 5:1, 4).

The “yoke of bondage” or “slaves” is contrasted with the freedom in Christ. The bondage alluded to relates to the Mosaic laws, where the religious experience is tied to external acts. Circumcision is the “golden standard” of residual works that Paul uses to illustrate this principle. But other issues are also on his mind! Religious duty that was “in anticipation” of Jesus Christ should now be complete in Him.

- *“Oh foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you?”* (Galatians 3:1). This is very aggressive language. It has sharpness to it. Paul is exasperated and perplexed at the lack of spiritual discernment of these people. They continue with religious acts that make it appear that Christ never came. This robs them of the dynamics of the new experience through Christ. This is so serious that they are “not obeying the truth.” The “spiritual” was being divorced from the “doctrinal.”¹
- *“Are ye now made perfect by the flesh?”* (3:2).
- *“Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith”* (3:34).
- *“Who bewitched you?”* What person(s) cast an evil spell and made you so enamored by works?²

This “residual doing” is so serious that the Galatians are warned:

- *“For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse”* (3:10a).
- *Paul labels all who adhere to the observances of the Mosaic Law as no longer being righteous before God.*³
- Anyone trying to attain righteousness by legal works is trying to bribe God.⁴

¹ George, Timothy; *The New American Commentary – Galatians* (B&H Publishing Group; Nashville, TN), p. 206.

² *Ibid.*, p. 207.

³ Longenecker, Richard N.; *Word Biblical Commentary* (Thomas Nelson; Nashville, TN), vol. 41, p. 116.

⁴ Bruce, F. F.; *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (William B. Eerdmans; Grand Rapids, MI), p. 138.

The identity of the Galatians with “doing something” limited the wonderful doctrine of grace.⁵ This, intellectually, obscured the gospel.

Faith is elevated in a unique way by Paul. “*The law is not of faith*” (3:12), but the “*just shall live by faith*” (3:11). This is an expression from Habakkuk 2:4. Faith is the means of salvation, but here it is noted in the future tense. Faith anticipates continual “action” towards salvation. The action “shall live” is unrelated to any of the Mosaic laws or statutes. It is **trust** in what Jesus has done and honors Him by living by the same moral standard He used – by wanting to be like Him so closely that He will adopt us as a son – an heir of God (4:7)!

Until now Paul is quite general but shamelessly curt in his admonishment. He is not done with the “*who hath bewitched you*” guilt-laden message. Knowing that they had originally received Jesus Christ and then began this apostasy, he asks:

- “*But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?*” (4:9).
- The words “know” God (*ginosko*) is a verb that means “to know intimately and on a personal level.”⁶
- How can you revert back to:
 - Weak and miserable ways?
 - And be in bondage again?
 - From his language, one might assume that they are reverting to pagan or evil behavior – **BUT** – not so!

This now is where the serious student stands back to see how simple it is to mock God, undermine what He has done and use “innocent” acts to deny the power of Christ’s blood!

What “horrible behavior” caused such anxious turmoil with Paul?!

“*Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years*” (Galatians 4:10).

These are Gentile Christians in Galatia. Are they going back to old pagan rites? Not by most Biblical analysts. This refers to the Jewish cultic calendar.⁷ If they had previously observed pagan practices, then were converted to Christianity (and that was true), someone had infiltrated this new Christian Church with Jewish rites. These were the Judaizers. Thus, Paul’s earlier question, “*Who hath bewitched you?*” is pointed. Someone had penetrated this new church and begun to contaminate the gospel by “calendar observances.”

It is academic to pinpoint the exact meaning of “each” Greek word. His “collective” use of these periods is instructive. There are two extremely important principles from which Paul is sharing:

1. He goes through the calendar extremes – “days” to “years.”

⁵ Boice, James Montgomery, “Galatians” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* by Frank E. Gaebelin (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 49530), vol. 10, p. 453.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 476.

⁷ Longenecker, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

2. He uses the term “seasons” (*kairous*), which, in this context, parallels the Hebrew word *moed*. This means “appointed times.” To “observe” calendric appointed times alludes to the annual Jewish feasts.

He is so anxious to address this new turn within this congregation that he uses collectively four terms “without mutual exclusiveness, covering all kinds of celebrations of days and periods observed by the Jews.”⁸

The Gentile Galatians had begun to observe the calendric statutes of the Torah. The words indicate that they started to fix dates on the calendar with the thought toward punctual religious observance!⁹ Clearly, the observance was more than a remembrance of what those times meant. It had become a religious obligation, tainting the meaning of the law and altering the wonders of Jesus.

“Many Jewish Christians continued to observe the sacred occasions as a matter of course. Paul himself appears to have regarded some of them at least as convenient punctuation marks in his apostolic schedule (cf. 1 Cor. 16:8; Acts 20:16). But for Gentile Christians to adopt them *de novo* as matters of legal obligation was quite another matter.”¹⁰

This parallels his concern for the Colossians where Paul noted, “*Therefore do not let anyone judge you with respect to food or drink, or in the matter of a feast, new moon, or Sabbath days*” (Colossians 2:16 – NET). This collective word group appeals once again to a religious duty to observe the Old Testament festivals (cf. Leviticus 23:2).

Intriguing is Paul’s anxiety and the moral passion with which he condemns this “religious behavior”! He uses words in the letter for those proselytizing – “false apostles” or “false brethren” (Galatians 2:4). He is saying that strict observance of the calendar events has nothing to do with securing divine favor.¹¹

“I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.... I desire to be present with you now, and to change my voice; for I stand in doubt of you” (Galatians 4:11, 20). This is Paul’s gloomiest utterance. He hasn’t given up on them – but appears close to it.

As the book of Galatians moves forward, the elevating themes that the apostle wants these believers to address are unfolded. Most laws that arose from Sinai were those of bondage – symbolized by Paul as the covenant given to Hagar and her descendants. The rules emanating from the covenant through Isaac he illustrates as bringing freedom (4:23-31). Then Paul notes: “*Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage*” (Galatians 5:1).

In his letter to the Romans, concern over the zeal of the Jewish people for the Mosaic Law surfaced. Notice how he is earnestly trying to get people to understand what the Christian dispensation means!

⁸ Burton, Galatians 2–4, as quoted by Longenecker, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

⁹ Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Hendriksen, William; *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (Baker Academic; Grand Rapids, MI), vol. B, p. 166.

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| 1. <i>“They (the Jewish people) have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge” (Romans 10:2).</i> | } | Paul is addressing issues on attaining eternal life. |
| 2. <i>“For Moses described the righteousness which is of the law (Mosaic), that the man which doeth those things shall live by them” (10:5). Now a warning:</i> | } | Before the Cross God was pleased through a worship experience that was filled with liturgical acts that pointed to the Messiah. Christ brought a change in all of that. |
| 3. <i>“They being ignorant of God’s righteousness are going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God” (10:3).</i> | } | Caution regarding idolizing that older experience is addressed. There is now a right and wrong way to God – to salvation! It is by faith in Christ’s righteousness. |
| 4. <i>“Christ is the end of the law for righteousness which is of the law to everyone that believeth” (10:4).</i> | } | This is the issue! Christ brought to an end the Mosaic laws, called earlier by Paul, the system of “works of the law” (9:32). The word believeth is <i>pisteuo</i> – meaning we are actively pleasing Jesus. This still implies a standard. That relates to the moral precepts. |

Again, the pointed concern: *“Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace” (Galatians 5:4).*

The law that calls us to liberty is the Decalogue. This is outlined in 5:13-14. Lest there be confusion, Paul lists sins related to that great body of laws (5:19-21). In language that cannot be associated with the Mosaic decrees, the apostle appeals to the work of the Holy Spirit.

- *“This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16).*
- Then in a beautiful rendition of what happens when the principles of the Decalogue fill a true believer’s heart and mind, he lists the fruits of the Spirit.

This unfolds a key provision of faith in Christ. The Decalogue relates to characteristics that are “not seen,” which are plantable in the very being of each individual (the end result of the everlasting covenant – Hebrews 8:10). The “law of Hagar,” “Sinai and Moses,” filled with “doing,” “liturgy” and “calendar events” is external. What can happen “in us” is **the** issue!

The bottom line: What law can be written in our minds and hearts? It is the moral law associated with the everlasting covenant.

- *“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them” (Hebrews 10:16).* This is another unique way that the Bible describes “Christ in us” (Colossians 1:27).
- *“And he declared unto you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, even ten commandments; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone” (Deuteronomy 4:13).*

Paul isn't finished with this issue. In his letter to the Colossians he is equally emphatic and uses even more explicit language.

The “Colossian Heresy”

Paul's life was filled with heartaches over the rapid apostasy of the budding Christian church. In his second letter to Timothy he noted: “*You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me*” (II Timothy 1:15). That's amazing! A similar concern came firmly as a warning to the leaders at the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:29-30).

In his letter to the Colossians he cautioned against the “*tradition of men,*” which is nothing more than “*philosophy and vain deceit*” (Colossians 2:8), later described as “*rudiments of the world*” (Colossians 2:20; cf. Galatians 4:3, 9). Paul is addressing again the requirements of the Mosaic Law.¹² This is clarified by the reference to festivals, new moons and Sabbath that relate to the feast celebrations the Jews were to keep only **when** in the land of Canaan (Colossians 2:16).

Who were these leaders that sought to taint the purity of the Christian movement? They were Jewish “elites,” such as the Essene Order.¹³ The apostle describes these individuals as those who practice “*voluntary humility*” and were “*vainly puffed up by fleshly mind*” (Colossians 2:18). They were interested in punctilious observance of the minutiae of the law.

Against the enticing offer of a higher wisdom, he [Paul] has emphasized that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are accessible in Christ. Against the belief in an indefinite series of intermediaries between God and our world, he sets forth Christ as the personal embodiment of the fullness of deity. Against the idea that these intermediaries should receive some meed of homage from those who have to approach God through them, he affirms that they have all been conquered by Christ and can no longer claim the allegiance of those whom Christ has redeemed. The whole body of teaching which the Colossian Christians were being urged to accept was a refurbishing of old patterns of thought and life which Christ had rendered obsolete; it should receive no countenance from men and women who had died with Christ and risen with him to newness of life.”¹⁴

The Colossians appear to have adopted circumcision and worship liturgy tied to the Mosaic Law. These matters previously spoke directly to the heart of Jewish life – circumcision had been a “sign” of loyalty to God and the law through an outward act that “choreographed” holiness. Paul had already addressed these matters to the Roman church (Romans 2:17-29). He passionately showed that spiritual circumcision occurs at baptism (Romans 2:29, Colossians 2:11-12) and that the physical requirement of the law was no longer present.¹⁵

The intensity of his concerns deepened because these Judaic issues were claimed to be necessary for salvation. Because of this “soteriological heresy” the central place of Jesus was lost. Legalistic requirements appeared to be a way of commendation to God instead of **preparing** the way to live with the Messiah.

¹² Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁵ Melick, Richard R, Jr.; *The New American Commentary* (B&H Publishing Group; Nashville, TN), vol. 32, p. 180.

The “doctrine of salvation” is at the core of Paul’s letter. The Christian dispensation did not bring in a flawed theocracy but a beautiful system of transformation based on faith in “Christ’s works” – His righteousness. Believers can be spiritually “in Him” and He “in them.” This bond comes from the heart and not from the works of the Mosaic Law.

Paul’s deepest arguments elevate Christ’s salvic acts even while we were in sin (Colossians 2:13). The cross that He was lifted up on became the metaphor for the crucifixion of the law. It was cancelled or abolished. What law? The one referenced as “*the handwritten ordinance*” (Colossians 2:14: “*Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross*”).

To emphasize this graphically, it was “*nailed to the cross,*” meaning it died. It was at its end. Those regulations were the writings of Moses (Deuteronomy 31:24-26). They were no longer a yardstick, commandments or guidelines to salvation. God no longer notices man through such personal efforts. This was similarly emphasized to the Ephesians: “*Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace*” (Ephesians 2:15; cf. Daniel 9:27a).

The Decalogue was different. It had two distinct theological aspects. It addressed the moral nature of man.

1. The condemnatory nature of the law (1 Cor 15:56; Rom 7:13ff.; Gal 3:10; Deut 27:26) presented a legal standard that had consequences.
2. It revealed God’s standards for human conduct. This revelatory aspect of the law was beneficial, and Paul acknowledged its helpfulness (Rom 7:13ff.).

The Colossians text states that the code of regulations that looked forward to Christ was against them and was canceled.¹⁶ Its purpose was ended.

Christ triumphed over the satanic realm (Colossians 2:15). The part of the ordinances and Jewish standards which anticipated the Messiah was no longer needed. Their observances, therefore, would actually deny the deepest meaning of the Cross and what He had done.

Paul becomes more pointed as to what law was removed by clearly addressing problem members in that church. Some were critical and attempting to dominate. “*Don’t let anyone judge you*” (Colossians 2:16). This violated the agreements of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) and was divisive. It was foreign to the spirit of Christ.

The ritual observance, a segment of that law, was now addressed.

- Food offered to idols had been a contentious issue that he discussed with the Corinthian believers (I Corinthians 8–10). The summary concern: “*Let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats*” (Romans 14:3). With this addition, infiltrators were promoting a stringent dietary lifestyle as part of holiness, which was wrong.
- Paul had already addressed with the Galatians those asserting the need to observe special days, months, seasons and years (Galatians 4:9-10). Now he states that others should not dictate a requirement to keep festivals, new moons and sabbaths. The latter

¹⁶ Melick, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

word does not have an article, thus it is tied with the other two, referring to the Jewish feasts that occupied their allegiance during a seven-month sacred year.

“The point is put beyond dispute when we note a regular Jewish way of speaking of the main festivals of Jewish religion (1 Chron. 23:31; 2 Chron. 2:3; 31:3; Neh. 10:33; Isa. 1:13-14; 1 Macc. 10:34; Ezek. 45:17, and Hos. 2:11 [15]; cf. Sappington 163; Aletti, *Epître aux Colossiens* 193 n. 112). In view of later discussion we should also note that the Essenes claimed to have received special revelation regarding ‘the holy Sabbaths and glorious feasts’ and also the new moon (CD 3:14-15; 1QS 9:26–10:8).¹⁷

As Christ had the deepest concern that His followers would not be deceived (Matthew 24:4), so Paul is not unmindful of that risk: “*I am saying this in order that no one may deceive you with persuasive language*” (Colossians 2:4).

Therefore, no one is to insinuate that these things are obligatory and must be observed.¹⁸ To continue observing feast days altered their meaning from validating the salvic work of the Messiah to come to being salvic acts of the law.¹⁹

Finally, Paul clarifies that the portions of the law that were abolished were only shadows of things they now possessed. They are part of the “body of Christ” which looked forward to “*the things that were to come*” (Colossians 2:17 – NIV). Those old ordinances are no longer valuable. The “object” that cast the shadows has come – Jesus Christ.²⁰ He is the fulfillment of Jewish eschatological hope.²¹

Conclusions

The moral law was embedded in stone and remains unchangeable. It was physically written by God! It is the basis of the everlasting covenant. It is the only legal decree that can become “part of man” – part of his very nature! God wants it to be written in the mind and heart! The Mosaic laws did have statutes that explained and embellished the meaning of that Decalogue. Their value remains. However, those statutes and judgments that regulated life and worship in anticipation of the Messiah ceased to be important.

Paul gives many examples of what that means from circumcision to dietary regulations, from feast observances to mysticism of angel worship. Identity with the laws that regulated the theocratic life of Israel had ceased. As a “text book,” they remain valuable. They describe how God’s redemptive plan is implemented and how it will bring sin to an end. If used as obligatory worship experiences, they detract from a deeper understanding of the Cross.

Knowledge of the Jewish theocracy provides fascinating insight through symbols and metaphors of man’s restoration. Even the seven calendric feasts give profound information relating to Messianic prophecy. In that context, the study of the Mosaic system provides beautiful views of how “blood” and a Priest could provide a remedy for sin. Even the timing of

¹⁷ Dunn, James D. G.; *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (William B. Eerdmans; Grand Rapids, MI), p. 175; cf. Summary, p. 151.

¹⁸ O’Brien, Peter T.; *Word Biblical Commentary* (Thomas Nelson Publishers; Nashville, TN), vol. 44, p. 138.

¹⁹ Deterding, Paul E.; *Colossians* (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO), p. 120.

²⁰ Hendriksen, *op. cit.*, vol. B, p. 124.

²¹ Dunn, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

harvest events pointed forward to “when” Jesus, as Priest, will finally harvest His “barley” and “wheat.”

Richer meaning into Messiah is being called for. Jesus is our Savior. A very personal and wonderful relationship with Him is now our privilege. That friendship is based on a law that actually reflects His character. It is totally based on moral principles summarized in the Decalogue. Since they represent standards that reflect divine thought when “in us,” we bond with heaven. In fact, we can understand what God’s system of rule means through the principle of what He requires. The law that He chose to personally write on stone demands wrapped attention. It is to be rewritten into our hearts.

Franklin S. Fowler, Jr., M.D.; Prophecy Research Initiative © 2010-present
EndTime Issues..., Number 114, December 23, 2010