



Lesson 2

What was the problem with the Law?

“For we maintain that a man is justified by **faith** apart from works of the **Law.**”

Romans 3.28

“Yes, Paul says we are justified by faith and not works, but don’t forget that James says ‘faith without works is dead.’” Ever said something similar? If not, you probably will. How have believers in Christ come to such radically different viewpoints about the necessity of following God’s commands? Part of the reason may be that we’ve been using the wrong historical construct for Paul’s words in Romans and other letters. It has long been assumed that the Jews, Pharisees in particular, were legalists who thought they could earn their salvation by their works. It is assumed that Paul, as a Hebrew of the Hebrews and a Pharisee (Phil 3.5) had once subscribed to this works mentality before being confronted by the Christ on the Damascus road (Acts 9), but the gospel given to him by Jesus was one where works were de-emphasized in favor of belief. Simply put, it has long been assumed that Paul’s gospel replaced salvation by works with salvation by faith. However, there’s a major problem with this interpretation of Paul’s gospel: where do we read that the Jews thought they could earn their salvation by their works? As we will see, that concept is not present in the Scriptures. Rather, it’s a construct formed during the Reformation and cast retroactively on Paul’s gospel. But that leaves us with a question: what was Paul’s problem with the Law?

Law & Covenant

When God delivered Israel out of Egyptian bondage and brought them to Mt. Sinai, He made this promise: “Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” (Exodus 19.5-6). Now, what was God saying to Israel? Was He telling them that by obedience they could earn His divine favor? Absolutely not! His favor was extended to them by grace, but if they were to continue in His favor they must observe His covenant Law. The Ten Commandments are spoken by God in Exodus 20, the preamble to the entire covenant Law. This covenant was ratified in Exodus 24 when...

1. God’s words were read to 70 elders of Israel, representatives of all the people (vss. 1-3, 7)
 2. The elders swore that “all that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!” (vss. 3, 7)
 3. Blood from sacrificed animals was sprinkled on the altar and the elders (vss. 6, 8)
- You will note that God’s covenant, of which the Law was a part, was a covenant between God and the entire people of Israel, not a covenant between God and each individual Israelite. This is an important point as it places the Law in its proper context. Law was not a means of achieving or earning God’s favor; Law was the means by which one maintained his place among God’s covenant people.

The book of Deuteronomy continually stressed the need to follow God's Law so that the blessings of covenant would be enjoyed. The people should continue to keep God's Law and pass that Law on to their children so "that it may be well with you and that you may multiply greatly, just as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey," (Deut 6.1-3). A series of covenant blessings and curses were given in Deut 28. These blessings were inherent with being God's covenant people; these blessings required their faithfulness to the covenant. Likewise, failure to keep Law would exclude the people from God's covenant blessings, resulting in the curses enumerated in vss. 15-68. Other passages could be examined, but note the closing exhortation in Deut 30.15-20. Israel was exhorted to choose between life and death. Life for Israel could be chosen by following the Lord's commandments and statutes, but if they turned their hearts away from God, stopped following His commandments and served other Gods, they would have chosen death. Again, Israel was never told that they could earn God's favor through obedience. Rather, they were promised blessings within the covenant relationship, curses outside of the covenant relationship. Obedience to covenant Law was the means by which Israel was assured of their covenant standing, and thus assured that God's gracious promises would be fulfilled. It's a subtle difference, but a significant one. As Daniel prayed in reflecting on the failures of his people, "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, we have sinned, committed iniquity, acted wickedly and rebelled, even turning aside from Your commandments and ordinances," (Daniel 9.4-5). God is gracious, He keeps covenant. However, the people did not keep covenant, thus they did not experience the covenant blessings, but felt the wrath of God's covenant curses.

Recap of Major Points

- » **The Mosaic covenant was a national covenant made with Israel, not a covenant made with individual people.**
- » **God's covenant with Israel was based on His grace. Israel could never "earn" the special status of being God's people. That was a gracious blessing that God bestowed on the people.**
- » **The Law was of great importance because it was part of God's covenant with Israel. Faithfulness to God's covenant Law insured that the people were in covenant with their God, thus could receive His blessings.**
- » **Faithless disobedience to covenant Law was a breach of covenant, resulting in the curses of the covenant rather than the blessings that were part of the covenant relationship.**
- » **So, Law was of great importance not because Israel could "earn" God's blessings, but because it insured their place in the covenant where God's gracious blessings were to be found.**

The Law & Legalism

Legalism is typically defined as seeking to earn salvation by law keeping. As we've seen, that was not the purpose of the Mosaic Law, but that's not to say that legalistic tendencies did not develop among Israel. They certainly did, but it was not legalism as we define it or as the Reformation saw it. The legalism of Jesus' day and of Paul's day was a national one. The Jews saw the Law as defining God's chosen people, so Law keeping was emphasized because it kept you within the bounds of God's chosen people, Israel. This attitude toward Law and national Israel led to some very destructive attitudes towards others. So, the Pharisees disdained "tax collectors and sinners," because even though they were born of the Israelite nation, they had departed from God's covenant Law and therefore could not be part of His covenant. As Jesus says of them, they "trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt," (Luke 18.9). The same contempt was expressed toward the common people who did "not know the Law," (John 7.49) and toward Jesus for perceived Sabbath violations (Matt. 12.1-14).

While the Pharisees viewed their fellow Israelites with contempt for failures in keeping covenant Law (and the burdensome traditions that had come to surround the Law), almost all Jews viewed the Gentiles with contempt. Since the Jews had the Law they felt assured that they were God's covenant people. However, the Gentiles were not God's covenant people, they did not have His Law. This helps to explain the Jew - Gentile tension which we discussed in Lesson 1, particularly the tension in the early church. So, Peter was questioned as to how he could eat with the uncircumcised (Acts 11.3). You will note that the complaint was not that Peter preached that forgiveness could be had in Christ (and not in perfect Law keeping), but that Peter had dined with those outside of God's covenant, those without His Law. Likewise, the issue in Acts 15 was not that Gentiles needed to perfectly keep Law to be saved, but that they needed to take on the Law of Moses and be circumcised. This would bring them under the Mosaic covenant, insuring that they could receive the covenant promises of God. Finally, note again Paul's address to the Jewish mob in Acts 22. They patiently heard him out as he talked about his conversion to the cause of Christ, but it was only when he mentioned his mission to the Gentiles that the crowd cried out, "away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!" (Acts 22.22)

Recap of Major Points

- » The Jews of Jesus' day and of Paul's day were legalistic, but not in the way that is normally ascribed to them. They did not believe that they could earn salvation, but they did believe their salvation lay in the fact that they were God's chosen people, with God's Law.
- » This attitude was particularly prevalent among the Pharisees who viewed with contempt any who did not follow as closely the Law (and their traditions). This contempt was seen in their attitude toward "sinners", the common Jews and Jesus.
- » Most Jews viewed the Gentiles with contempt because they were a people not under God's covenant, without God's Law. This tension was seen in the early church as many Jewish Christians struggled to accept their Gentile brethren who didn't have the Law.

Paul's Problem With The Law

1. The problem was not with obedience! Whether in the Old Testament or the New Testament, obedience to God's will is exhorted and praised. Paul was certainly not lessening the demands of obedience, but sought to "bring about the obedience of faith," (Rom 1.5). Furthermore, the final chapters of Romans exhort the saints (both Jew and Gentile) to obey Christ in a variety of matters.
2. One main problem with Jewish reliance on the Law was that it hindered faith in Christ. Many Jews rejected Christ because they failed to realize that the Law was meant to bring them to Christ (see Galatians 3). They thought of the Law as the assurance that they were God's covenant people, when they should have viewed it as God's means of bringing them to Christ.
3. Within the church, the Jewish Christians were wrong in trying to bind Mosaic Law on their Gentile brethren. The Law did not justify the Jew before God, nor would it justify the Gentile. Both needed to place their faith in Christ. Only by trusting and following Him could Jew and Gentile be righteous.