

SANCTIFICATION AND THE LAW IN GALATIANS AND ROMANS

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INTRODUCTION

Paul's position on the Mosaic Law and its place in the believer's ethical life is a major area of debate. That debate has been complicated recently by the introduction of the New Perspective. Granted that difficulty, the following paper will assume the traditional Protestant interpretations (following Luther) of *sola fide* and *sola gratia* and within that framework will argue that, for Paul, grace, not Law, is the principle from which ethics derives. This is particularly important as most, if not all, controversies surrounding Pauline theology are ultimately rooted in the issue of Law.¹

In short, this paper sets out a brief defense of *sanctification* by grace alone through faith alone apart from works of the Law via an analysis of the relevant passages first in Galatians and then in Romans—that is, though it is commonly argued that fidelity to the Law has no place in justification, that it likewise has no place in sanctification.

THE LAW'S PLACE IN SANCTIFICATION IN GALATIANS

One needs only a cursory reading of Galatians to recognize that Paul is attacking a heresy related to the keeping of the Law. Since Luther, it has been common to read Paul's opponents as preaching justification by faith plus works. The discussion below, however, will argue that Paul is actually opposing the notion of sanctification by the Law. His opponents more likely saw themselves as completing Paul's otherwise deficient Gospel.² Yet it is apparent that Paul had come to believe that the Law had absolutely no place in the believer's life—not for justification and also not for sanctification.³

Galatians 3:1-5

The key passage of Galatians is 3:1-5. The first chapter introduces the basic problem, namely, that the Galatians were falling into a false Gospel (1:8-9). In the latter half of the first and the entire second chapter, Paul defends his apostolic credentials. Granted, this was

¹ Brendan Byrne. "The Problem of Nomos and the Relationship with Judaism in Romans," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (April 1, 2000): 294.

² Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 92.

³ It should be noted, however, that there is some debate as to how long Paul had held this view. Based on 5:11, some have seen a post-call mission in which Paul initially urged converts to keep the Mosaic Law. The majority opinion simply holds that Paul's reference in 5:11 was to his pre-conversion preaching. In any case, the point is that some development in Paul's thought is evident, and that by the time he wrote this letter, he was firmly opposed to requiring Christians to keep any aspect of the Law. For a detailed discussion of this and a defense of the minority view, see Douglas A. Campbell, "Galatians 5:11: Evidence of an Early Law-Observant Mission by Paul?" *New Testament Studies* 57, no. 3 (July 1, 2011): 325-347.

important, as Paul's opponents were apparently attacking his credentials. More important, though, is the function of that section. Paul grounds the argument about his apostleship in his claim that he, unlike his opponents, was not interested in pleasing men because his Gospel came directly from Christ (1:10-12). In a similar move, he caps off his discussion by reminding the Galatians of his encounter with Peter, where rather than attempting to please men, he condemned Peter to his face for compromising the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is therefore evident that the first two chapters serve to introduce Paul's main charge and his basic question—a question that grounds the whole book.⁴ He asks, “Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Gal 3:2-3, ESV). The key word here is “perfected” (επιτελεω), which carries the idea of being brought to full maturity. In short, Paul is asking the Galatians if sanctification comes by the Spirit or by keeping the Law. In fact, that is the primary the issue that he takes up throughout the epistle.⁵

Five Word Pictures Describing the Law

Given Paul's focus on the means of sanctification, it is not surprising that he spends chapters two through four examining the relationship between faith and the Law. In doing so, he gives five word pictures by which he describes the Law that, taken as a whole, help clarify exactly for the reader Paul's view on it.

The Law as a Curse (Gal 3:10-14)

Galatians 3:10-14, it must be admitted, is a notoriously difficult passage, not least of all because of its extremely compressed logic.⁶ Still, it seems one is on safe ground in recognizing that in this passage Paul compares the Law to a curse. Specifically in verse thirteen, “of the Law” should be considered an appositional genitive, which equates the Law with a curse.⁷ Moreover, this is a case of metonymy, an “extremely common” device by which people “take one well-understood or easy-to-perceive aspect of something and use it to stand either for the thing as a

⁴ Stephen Kerry, "An Exegetical Analysis of Galatians 3:1-5," *Journal of Biblical and Pneumatological Research* 2 (2010): 79.

⁵ It has been commonly asserted ever since Luther that the central theme of Galatians is justification by faith. Actually, it is sanctification by faith. Paul certainly discusses the former, but it is as a premise rather than a conclusion. In Bruce's words, justification by faith was for Paul “a fighting doctrine – not only a principle *for* which to contend but a weapon *with* which to contend.” (F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 188).

⁶ Timothy G. Gombis, "The 'Transgressor' and the 'Curse of the Law': the Logic of Paul's Argument in Galatians 2-3," *New Testament Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 81

⁷ This is not to say that “the Law” and “a curse” are absolutely identical, but rather, for Paul, that the Law is actually a type of curse. See Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 95, for a discussion of the genitive of apposition.

whole or for some other part of it.”⁸ In this case, the notion of a “curse” is abstract, but its basic idea is obvious. It conjures up a sense of dread of an imposed evil. “Of the Law” serves as a salient example of a curse.⁹ “The Law” is a concrete notion, and thus, so linked, it helps the reader grasp not only the broader category of “curse,” but Paul’s own view of the Law. Since Paul sees the Law as a type of curse, he says plainly in verse ten, “all who rely on works of the law are under a curse.”

The Law as a Jailor (Gal 3:22-23)

Next, Paul pictures the Law as a jailor. He says it “imprisoned” (3:22, 23: συγκλειω) men “under sin . . . until the coming of faith.” Further, the Law “held captive” (φρουρεω) those under it. That which “imprisons” and “holds captive” is a jailor of some sort. The basic idea of this metaphor is clear. As a jailor restrains and incarcerates for a period of time, so too did the Law. The temporal aspect is evident not only in the metaphor, but in the text itself. Paul says men were imprisoned “*before* faith came . . . *until* the coming of faith.” Moreover, each of the verbs is in the aorist except “held captive,” which is imperfect (and thus suggestive of something that was the case but no longer is).

The Law as a Pedagogue (Gal 3:24-25)

Immediately after comparing the Law to a jailor, Paul shifts to a different but conceptually related analogy: a pedagogue. Unfortunately, this picture is almost entirely obscured by virtually all modern translations. In verse twenty-four, Paul says “the law was our παιδαγωγος,” with παιδαγωγος being variously rendered “guardian” (ESV/NIV/NET/HCSB), “schoolmaster” (KJV), and perhaps worst of all “tutor” (NASB/NKJV). It is unfortunate that each of these translations fail to capture the basic idea of the Greek term, and possibly harmful in that the translations carry ideas foreign to it. Pedagogues were slaves who were with children at all times, imposing discipline, and in general training them in virtue.¹⁰ Though they were known to be harsh disciplinarians, the main idea Paul seems to have in mind is the way they restricted children, and so the metaphor is similar to the jailor.¹¹ Moreover, a pedagogue’s job was temporary. “All the sources condemn those who attempted to retain the restrictive control of the pedagogue—no matter how protective and beneficial those restrictions once were—once the charge had come of age.”¹²

Again, however, the notion of restriction was primarily a negative one, for whatever benefits the pedagogue may have provided, no one wished to be under the authority of one, and indeed, children longed for their freedom. Such ideas are obscured, if not totally lost, by translations such as “tutor” and “guardian.” Indeed, such words even carry positive connotations and thus completely miss Paul’s point!

⁸ George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 77.

⁹ Cf. Lakehoff, 89.

¹⁰ Norman H. Young, “*Paidagogos*: The Social Setting of a Pauline Metaphor,” *Novum Testamentum* 29, no. 2 (1987), 159.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹² *Ibid.*

A further problem is found in that several translations, following the KJV, render εἰς in verse twenty-three “to lead us to.”¹³ Thus, the Law becomes a “tutor that leads us to Christ.” Yet εἰς should be translated temporally: “until.”¹⁴ Paul’s idea, again implicit in the metaphor and made explicit by his language, is that the Law’s function was temporary and ended with the coming of Christ.

The Law as a House Manager (Gal 4:1-7)

Next, Paul extends the metaphor of the pedagogue to include house managers. This is hardly surprising, as the concepts were even connected in extra-biblical Greek.¹⁵ The main difference in a guardian or house manager and a pedagogue was that the latter was a temporary position held over children. The former continued in their duties after the child was grown, at which point the child (now a man) as “owner of everything” (4:1) could exercise full authority.

The basic idea in this metaphor, then, is that the Law kept men from exercising their full spiritual authority. But now that Christ has come, whatever function the Law may continue to have, it no longer is permitted to hinder the believer’s full access to the Father. Now, rather than being like slaves under (the curse of?)¹⁶ the Law, the believer is a free son: “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into [your]¹⁷ hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.” (4:6-7).

The Law as Hagar (Gal 4:21-31)

Paul’s strongest picture comes in the last section of chapter four. There, he develops the story of Sarah and Isaac against Hagar and Ishmael. The Jews, of course, would have naturally related to the former pair. Paul, however, sets another rhetorical trap, for he points out that Isaac was the son of a free woman and Ishmael of a slave woman. Yet he then identifies those under the Law as “Hagar . . . [who] corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children” (4:25) He then presses his allegory further, pointing out that sons of the free woman (whom Paul has identified as the Galatian believers) must “cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman” (4:30).

¹³ Taking εἰς as an accusative of purpose. See Daniel Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 166.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Young, 155.

¹⁶ Todd A. Wilson, "'Under law' in Galatians: a Pauline Theological Abbreviation," *Journal of Theological Studies* 56, no. 2 (October 1, 2005): 369-72.

¹⁷ Here following the Majority rather than Critical Text. An analysis of the use of pronouns in Galatians strongly suggests that the first person plural refers to the Jews, the second person plural refers to the Gentile Galatians, and the third person plural refers to the Judaizers. On this view, the corruption from υμῶν to ημῶν is easily explained either as a scribal error and/or an imposition of a replacement theology (perhaps influenced by an appositional rather than conjunctive view of ἐπι τὸν Ἰσραὴλ τοῦ θεοῦ (6:16)).

It is impossible to miss Paul's point here. To be under the Law is to be in slavery, but to be under Christ is to be free. This theological truth, however, is not enough for Paul. He even wants the Galatian Church to excommunicate those who wish to practice the Law.¹⁸

The Principle of Sanctification in Galatian: Grace

The brief analysis of the word pictures above makes it clear that, for Paul, sanctification does not come by living under the Law. On the contrary, to live under the Law is to be cursed, imprisoned, restrained, lacking authority and freedom, and near being cut off from the community of God in Christ. The sanctifying principle is not Law but grace (see 1:6).

None of this is to suggest that the Law is evil. What all of the metaphors Paul uses have in common is the idea of a desire for freedom. Jailors, pedagogues, and house managers are all good in and of themselves, especially insofar as they restrain evil. Curses are evil, but they are "good" insofar as they are laid upon and destroy the wicked. Finally, it is good to protect the inheritance of one's children, even if that means separating them from pretenders. In each case, then, Paul picks a *good* metaphor, but that goodness is in each object itself; it is not good to be under any of their authority. That, however, is just Paul's point. Christians are not to desire to be under the Law for their sanctification. Such is a false gospel (1:8-9) and will only result in corruption (5:16-21). Those who live by faith under grace, however, will be perfected and will bear the fruit of the Spirit (5:22-26).

THE LAW'S PLACE IN SANCTIFICATION IN ROMANS

Having briefly studied Galatians, it remains to discover if the same message is found in Romans. It is widely recognized that Romans 5-8 form a specific unit within the epistle and that this unit deals broadly with issues of sanctification. Before surveying that section, though, it will be useful to offer some brief linguistic evidence showing the linkage between this section and certain key concepts in it with Paul's notion of sanctification.

Life, Death, and Sanctification in Romans 5-8

The word "death" (θανάτος) occurs twenty-two times in twenty verses in the book of Romans.¹⁹ Its verbal counterpart (ἀποθνήσκω) occurs twenty-four times in nineteen verses.²⁰ The distribution of these terms is particularly important. Of all forty-six occurrences, thirty-nine of

¹⁸ Cf. Steven Di Mattei, "Paul's Allegory of the Two Covenants (Gal 4.21-31) in Light of First-Century Hellenistic Rhetoric and Jewish Hermeneutics," *New Testament Studies* 52, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 121. Further, this theme of enslavement under the Law is repeated throughout Galatians. Excluding the allegory, see 2:4; 3:27 (antithetically); 4:1, 3, 7; 5:1. The term is also used in the ten verses of the allegory seven times—a clear point of emphasis.

¹⁹ Rom 1:32; 5:10, 12 (twice), 14, 17, 21; 6:3, 4, 5, 9, 16, 21, 23; 7:5, 10, 13 (twice), 24; 8:2, 6, 38.

²⁰ Rom 5:6, 7 (three times), 8, 15; 6:2, 7, 8, 9, 10 (twice); 7:2, 3, 6, 9; 8:13, 34; 14:7, 8 (three times), 9, 15.

them (85%) are found in chapters five through eight. If nothing else, this strongly implies that, for Paul, the problem of death and the issue of sanctification are closely related.

This is confirmed by a comparison of the words for noun and verbal forms for life (ζωη, and ζω, respectively). In their cases, of the thirty-six total occurrences, twenty-four (67%) are found in chapters five through eight.²¹ This figure is all the more impressive when one realizes that of the remaining twelve usages, half of them are clustered tightly together in 14:7-11. Similarly, of the remaining seven usages for the words for death found outside of chapters five through eight, five of them are found in the same passage (14:7-11). One other is found in verse fifteen. That passage, interestingly enough, deals with Christian ethics (in particular, judging one another), an issue obviously closely related to sanctification!

All in all, then, of the eighty-two total occurrence of words for life and death in Romans, seventy-five of them (91%!) occur in Romans 5-8 and in 14:7-15, all passages very closely associated with the doctrine of sanctification.

A Survey of Romans 5-8

Life in Christ (Rom 5)

Paul begins chapter five with a transitional passage. Verses one through eleven are a clearly defined unit, distinct both from the sections both before and after it.²² Its theme is summed up in the first verse: “since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God.” The rest of the entire unit fleshes out this idea of “peace with God.” The problem is that, though believers are justified, they still sin. How, then, can there be peace?

Paul begins to answer that in 5:11, noting that believers have “reconciliation” with God through Jesus Christ. There is considerable debate over the precise meaning of 5:12, but it is sufficient here to note that, in some sense, to be in Adam is to die whereas to be in Christ to be live, and that because of their respective disobedience and obedience to God (5:12-21). The salient point for this discussion is that sin brings death, a fundamental idea in this entire unit. Yet it is just at this point, that Paul mentions the Law, saying, “Now the law came in to increase the trespass” (5:20). Thus, having already established a strong correlation between sin and death, Paul now establishes a connection with the Law and sin²³; thus, one can see that where there is Law, there is death. Moreover, it should be noted that Paul probably does not have the Mosaic Law exclusively in view here, but rather a general notion of law²⁴ (of which, at appropriate times, the Mosaic Law is a specific subset). This creates a tension in the text, for the believer has life in Christ, and yet if the Law brings death, then the relationship to the believer and the Law needs to be resolved.

²¹ ζωη: 2:7; 5:10, 17, 18, 21, 6:4, 22, 23; 7:10; 8:2, 6, 10, 38; 11:15. ζω: 1:17; 6:2, 10 (twice), 11, 13; 7:1, 2, 3, 9; 8:12, 13 (twice); 9:26; 10:5, 12:1; 14:7, 8 (three times), 9, 11.

²² John Toews, *Romans* (Scottsdale, PN: Herald Press, 2004), 134.

²³ This corresponds nicely with 3:19, “through the law comes knowledge of sin.” This is not merely an abstract principle, but the reason that “by the works of the law no human being will be justified.”

²⁴ Peter W. Gosnell, “Law in Romans: Regulation and Instruction,” *Novum Testamentum* 51, no. 3 (January 1, 2009): 256-58.

Slaves of Righteousness (Rom 6)

Paul begins to offer that resolution in chapter six. In the first eleven verses, he lays out the implications of a believer's union with Christ. Since they are united with Christ, then they "died" with Him, and just so, will be "united with Him in a resurrection like His" (6:5). Therefore, believers are to "walk in the newness of life" (6:4) and "consider [themselves] dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (6:11).

So the main principle is that Christians are free from sin, but Paul had already established a connection between Law and sin. He therefore says plainly: "you are not under law but under grace." Paul then considers the charge of antinomianism, which he quickly dismisses by pointing out "in human terms" (6:19) that a person will serve something. Therefore, it is in one's best interest to serve righteousness, which leads to sanctification, rather than sin, which leads to death.²⁵

Freedom from the Law (Rom 7:1-6)

Paul's argument thus far is clear. Humans are sinners by nature, which the Law reveals. Since sin brings death, therefore, those under the Law do not "live" at all. Instead, believers are united with Christ and therefore no longer under the Law. Since they are not under the Law, they are free from sin and can serve righteousness instead, and that by Christ's resurrection power.

But a question presents itself: how is it that a believer is no longer under the Law? Appealing to the analogy of marriage,²⁶ Paul points out that as one is bound in marriage only so long as his or her spouse lives, so too, one is only under the Law so long as he lives.²⁷ Since, however, the believer died with Christ and was raised and united with Him, then the believer is no longer bound to the old "marriage" to the Law, but now to his new "marriage," that is, to Christ. As such, Paul's language is very clear: "you also have died to the law through the body of Christ" (7:4), and again, "now we are released from the law" (7:6). It is just here that Paul offers the first hints of how life under grace is so different from life under the Law; for rather than living under the Law, "we serve in the new way of the Spirit" (7:6). He explains just what it means to live according to the Spirit in the next section.

²⁵ It is entirely too common at points such as this to attempt to smuggle in the Law through an emphasis on ethical demands. See, for instance, Paula Fredriksen, "Judaizing the Nations: the Ritual Demands of Paul's Gospel." *New Testament Studies* 56, no. 2 (April 1, 2010): 251-52. There is certainly continuity between OT ethical and ritual demands and those of the New Covenant, but it goes too far to assert, therefore, that Paul saw believers under some aspects of the Law.

²⁶ Peter J. Tomson, "What Did Paul Mean by 'Those Who Know the Law'? (Rom 7.1)," *New Testament Studies* 49, no. 4 (October 1, 2003): 580.

²⁷ This raises an interesting question regarding Jesus' own relationship to the Law. It is arguable to what extent Jesus, as the Messianic King, was under the Law; but it would seem, on the force of Paul's point here, that upon His resurrection, He would no longer be under it in *any* sense. And since believers are the "bride of Christ," one could possibly make the case that to put one's self under the Law is a form of spiritual adultery, perhaps a type of spiritual polygamy!

The Impotence of the Law (Rom 7:7-8:16)

Before Paul fleshes out the notion of living by the Spirit, he steps back to consider the power of the Law. He assures his readers that the Law “is holy and righteous and good” (7:12). Yet he reiterates his claim that the Law brings sin, and sin brings death. The problem, then, is not with the Law *per se*, much less with a perceived lack of goodness on its part. Rather, the problem is that the Law is completely impotent to bring righteousness.²⁸

It is in this context that Paul discusses his personal struggles with the Law in 7:14-25. This section has been hotly debated, but one thing is clear: the passage proves that the Law is powerless to prevent sin and produce life. Again, he insists that the problem is not strictly with the Law but rather with man, for “nothing good dwells in . . . my flesh” (7:18). Indeed, it is the “sin that dwells within” (7:20) that is the problem, which is the problem that the Law reveals.

The important point is that the flesh is corrupt and so cannot produce righteousness. Since the Law’s primary function is to demonstrate that, it cannot produce righteousness, nor can the flesh living under the Law be sanctified. Yet if the Law cannot sanctify the flesh, then it remains for the Spirit to bring about God’s will in the believer’s life, just as Paul already stated.

Chapter eight focuses on this issue. Believers are not condemned (by the Law or anything or anyone else) because “the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” (8:2). Though the believer’s body is dead, his spirit is alive to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, which is the same Spirit that raised Christ (8:10-11). He, therefore, faces a sort of dualism—will he walk according to his old, dead nature or his new, regenerated nature? All believers are children of God (8:16), but those who make themselves slaves of righteousness and live in the Spirit’s power gain the privilege of being called “Sons of God” (8:14).²⁹ Such believers may be truly called sanctified (cf. 7:22).

The Principle of Sanctification in Romans: The Holy Spirit

The above survey should make clear that, for Paul, sanctification is that which leads to life. Yet by its very nature, the Law—which was added in order to demonstrate man’s basic sinfulness—cannot bring life. Instead, it only brings condemnation. Therefore, believers who have found righteousness and life in Jesus Christ are not and cannot be under the Law. Instead, they have died with Christ and are married to Him and therefore operate under the power of His grace. That grace is effected by the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, the principle of sanctification in Romans is not Law. Law is the principle of condemnation. Rather, the principle of sanctification is the Holy Spirit Himself. Those who avail themselves to His power and guidance will find themselves bearing fruit and reaping eternal life, even on this side of the grave.

²⁸ Here, echoing his arguments from chapters one through three.

²⁹ It is hard not to think of the “sons of God” here in Genesis 6, who should best be taken as the godly line of Seth. The phrase is remarkably rare in all of Scripture, but whether referring to angels or men, it always has a connotation of practical righteousness.

CONCLUSION

The above analysis suggests that in two of the so-called *Hauptbriefe*³⁰ of Paul, the apostle strongly condemns attempts to place believers under Law for their sanctification. Instead, for him, it is grace and the Holy Spirit that brings a Christian to spiritual maturity. Thus, it seems that this idea went to the very core of the Gospel as Paul understood it, and therefore, it should deeply affect the way Christians today consider it.

In Galatians, Paul argues that sanctification is by grace through faith alone, and that the Law—while good in itself—no longer has authority over the believer in Christ. Moreover, so great is this a threat to the Gospel, he says that Christians should remove from themselves those people who insist that fidelity to the Law is required for Christian maturity. As such, believers are to live under grace rather than Law. In a similar vein, Paul argues in Romans that due to the Christian's union with Christ, he is no longer bound to the Law, but instead lives under grace and follows the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This could well be an important message for the Church today. It is not uncommon to hear ministers proclaim a clear Gospel message of faith alone in Christ alone for salvation, but then in the discipleship process begin training new believers to focus on a near legalistic approach to their walk. Rather, ministers, following Paul, should “preach for faith,” and recognize that the faith that saves is the same faith that sanctifies. For Paul, this was the very essence of the Gospel. It should be for the Church today as well.

³⁰ Thomas D. Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2003), 365.

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