

The Apostle Paul's Teaching on Justification in the Book of Galatians

Did Paul teach the Galatians that they were not obligated to keep God's law?

Galatians 5:18—"But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law" (*KJV*)—has proven to be a major stumbling block for mainstream Christianity, which generally assumes that Paul was telling the Galatians that they were not required to keep God's commandments.

The problem, as is the case with numerous similar passages, is one of poor translation. The definite article "the" is not part of the original Greek text; the passage should read: "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law." But what does it mean to be "not under law"? Does this refer to God's holy, righteous laws and commandments? Does it refer to ritual laws of the Old Testament? What about the traditional laws of Judaism?

As we delve into the apostle Paul's writings in Galatians involving "justification by faith" and "works of law," keep these key background points in mind:

1) Just as Paul instructed Christians in Rome, once we have been justified from past sins, we cannot continue to live in sin as a *way of life*—because sin is the "transgression" of God's law (I John 3:4, *KJV*). He wrote: "What then shall we say? **Shall we continue in sin, so that grace may abound? MAY IT NEVER BE! We who died to sin, how shall we live any longer therein?**" (Rom. 6:1-2). Concerning keeping the laws of God in the spirit, Paul wrote to the Romans that they "might serve in newness of *the* spirit, and not in *the* oldness of *the* letter.... [For] **the law is indeed holy, and the commandment holy and righteous and good....** For we know that the law is spiritual..." (Rom. 7:6, 12, 14). Paul NEVER taught against God's laws and commandments in any of the churches.

2) The phrase "works of law" refers to the works of *any* law—the laws of God, the laws of Judaism, and the laws of pagan religions. Clearly, Paul used "works of law" in the broadest sense—which included *all* religious works of law. However, when the definite article "the" is used in the Greek—as in "works of the law"—it is referring specifically to the Law of God. (For a more detailed explanation of "works of law" and "works of the law," see the article, "Did the Apostle Paul Teach a Righteousness *Without* Law-Keeping?")

Therefore, Paul's use of the phrase "works of law" includes all humanly-devised religious decrees, traditional laws of Judaism (Mark 7:1-13), as well as the ritual and sacrificial laws followed by Gentiles in worshipping their gods (Acts 14:8-18).

3) Throughout Paul's writings, he emphasizes that justification is graciously granted to the believer **based on repentance and faith** in the sacrifice and shed blood of Jesus Christ. This *state* of justification is called the "gift of righteousness," or the "gift of justification," which God the Father freely imputes to the repentant believer (Rom. 5:17). It can never be earned by doing *any* kind of works of *any* law.

Galatians Two: Paul wrote that he was forced to rebuke Peter, Barnabas and other Jews publicly for their hypocrisy in reverting back to adhering to a traditional law of Judaism that forbade Jews from eating with Gentiles. Peter knew better, as God first used him to preach the gospel and repentance to Gentiles, beginning with Cornelius and his household (Acts 10).

As will be seen, the account in Galatians chapter two does not involve any law or commandment of God—only traditional laws of Judaism, which Paul referred to here as "*works of*

law.” Observing such traditional Jewish laws can never bring spiritual justification—or put one in “right standing” with God the Father. Let us scrutinize the entire account verse by verse:

“But when Peter came to Antioch, I withstood him to *his* face because he was to be condemned; for before certain *ones* came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles. However, when they came, he drew back and separated himself *from the Gentiles*, being afraid of those of *the* circumcision party. And the rest of *the* Jews joined him in *this* hypocritical act, insomuch that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.

“But when I saw that they did not walk uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in the presence of them all, ‘**If you, being a Jew, are living like the Gentiles, and not according to Judaism, why do you compel the Gentiles to Judaize?** [That is, to eat separately, as do unconverted Jews.] We who are Jews by nature—and not sinners of *the* Gentiles—knowing that **a man is not justified by** [traditional] **works of law, but through the faith of Jesus Christ**, we also have believed in Christ Jesus in order that we might be justified by *the* faith of Christ, and not by [traditional] works of law; because **by** [traditional] **works of law shall no flesh be justified** [before God from past sins].

“ ‘Now then, if we are seeking to be justified in Christ, *and* we ourselves are found to be sinners, *is* Christ then *the* minister of sin? MAY IT NEVER BE! For if I build again those things that I destroyed [the adherence to the laws of Judaism], I am making myself a transgressor. For I through law [since the wages of sin is death] died [in the operation of baptism] to law [that is, to Judaism’s traditional laws], in order that I may live to God [in love and obedience]. I have been crucified with Christ [by baptism], yet I live. *Indeed*, it is no longer I; but Christ lives in me. For *the life* that I am now living in *the* flesh, I live by faith—that *very faith* of the Son of God, Who loved me and gave Himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness [justification] *is* through *works of* law, then Christ died in vain’ ” (Gal. 2:11-21).

The whole purpose of repentance, baptism and justification by faith in the sacrifice and shed blood of Jesus Christ is to receive the Holy Spirit of God, which is our begetting from God the Father and the “earnest” (pledge or down payment) of our salvation (I John 3:9; Eph. 1:13-14). Paul wrote nothing in this passage that can be construed to mean he was abolishing the laws and commandments of God—for NO MAN CAN DO SO!

Galatians Three: Paul continues in chapter three, making it clear that *any* work of *any* law is not able to bring about justification for past sins. While God requires Christians to keep His laws and commandments in their full spiritual intent, no law has the power to forgive sin, justify a person to God spiritually, impart the Holy Spirit, or bestow eternal life. The function of God’s laws and commandments is to *define sin*: “O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you *into* not obeying the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ, crucified, was set forth in a written public proclamation? This only I desire to learn from you: **did you receive the Spirit of God by** [traditional] **works of law, or by the hearing of faith?** Are you so foolish? Having begun in *the* Spirit, are you now being perfected in *the* flesh [through obedience to carnal laws of Judaism]?... Therefore, *consider this*: He Who is supplying the Spirit to you, and Who is working deeds of power among you, *is He doing it by works of law* or by *the hearing of faith?*” (Gal. 3:1-5).

Concerning the laws and commandments of God, Paul demonstrates that they are **not contrary** to God’s promises of eternal life—which can only come through loving obedience and faith in Jesus Christ. “*Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? MAY IT NEVER BE! For if a law had been given that had the power to give life, then* righteousness [justification] would indeed have been by law. But the Scriptures have shut up all things under sin, so that by *the* faith of Jesus Christ the promise [of eternal life] might be given to those who believe. Now before faith came, we were guarded under law, having been shut up unto the faith that was yet to be revealed [at Christ’s first coming]. In this way, the law was our tutor *to lead us* to Christ that

we might be justified by faith. But since faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor” (Gal. 3:21-25).

After repentance, baptism and the laying of hands, God gives the Holy Spirit—which unites with the spirit of man within the believer (I John 3:9) bringing conversion (John 14:17). God, then begins to write His laws and commandments in the mind of the new believer (Heb. 10:16). Instead of the *external* tutoring of the law, the believer now begins to develop the mind of Christ by the Holy Spirit through faith (Phil. 2:5). This is the *internal* working of the Holy Spirit to lead the believer in all righteousness (Rom. 8:14).

Galatians Five: Judaism required that Gentile proselytes be circumcised in the flesh before they could enter the synagogue. They were then required to keep the traditional laws of Judaism. False teachers were causing converts in Galatia to revert back to those teachings, which were mixed with pagan Gnosticism derived from Hellenistic Judaism. This was the “yoke of bondage” of which Paul wrote. On the other hand, the laws and commandments of God were *never* a “yoke of bondage”—even when kept in the letter of the law, as required under the Old Covenant (Deut. 4:1-8, 39-40; 5:1-21, 32-33; 6:1-25).

This is the reason Paul admonished the Galatians to remain unyielding in the *true* faith, warning them not to revert back to “works of law” of Judaism for justification: “Therefore, stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and do not be held again in a yoke of bondage. Behold, I, Paul, tell you that if you become circumcised [in the flesh, rather than in the heart by the Spirit (Rom. 2:25-29; Col. 2:13)], Christ shall profit you nothing! Again, I am personally testifying to every man who is being [physically] circumcised that he is a debtor to do the whole law [all the Old Testament laws and the traditional laws of Judaism, thereby eliminating repentance, faith and baptism].

“You who are attempting to be justified by *works of law*, you are being deprived of any *spiritual* effect from Christ. You have fallen from grace! For we through *the* Spirit are waiting for *the* hope of righteousness by faith” (Gal. 5:1-5).

With this background, we can see that in Galatians 5:18 Paul was continuing his point about attempting to achieve justification by works. Thus, the phrase “not under law” has nothing to do with abrogating God’s laws and commandments, but refers to *not* being under, or dependant on, *works of law* for justification—“But if you are led by *the* Spirit, you are not under [*works of*] law.