

Neither Jew Nor Greek

Social Implications of the Mosaic Law

By David Maas



Galatians 5:2-3, “*Listen!* I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision Christ will not benefit you. Now *I am testifying* again to every man getting circumcised, that he is a debtor to perform the whole law.”

— Introduction —

The controversy that prompted the Apostle Paul’s to write his most contentious letter was circumcision. Certain Jewish believers from Jerusalem had arrived in Galatia to instruct Gentile Christians to get circumcised to “complete” their faith and become true “sons of Abraham” (**Galatians 3:1-4**). In **Galatians 5:2-3** Paul warned the Galatians, *if they embraced circumcision much more was involved*. The Law of Moses was a complete package and one could not just adopt one or two its regulations. Their contemplated course of action would entail much more than just circumcision, Sabbath keeping or the avoidance of unclean meats.

A perennial and divisive issue in the Christian church has been the question: *Are Christians under the Law of Moses?* Is the *Torah* still in effect for Christians and authoritative for how they are to live out their faith, or at least are portions thereof still in force?

Because of recent doctrinal movements in North American Christianity this issue is once more front and center. New voices are teaching Christians to keep the Law. In these new movements the *Torah* and Jewish particulars have become the focal point of faith and practice in said groups. Not always understood are *the social implications for the church if Christians adopt a truly Torah-observant lifestyle*.

In the New Testament the most detailed response to this question is in Paul’s letter to the Galatians.

— Background —

Some Jewish Christians from Jerusalem had infiltrated the house churches of Galatia with disruptive teachings, in particular the requirement for male believers to be circumcised (**Galatians 5:2-3, 6:12-13**). Possibly the disruptive men from Jerusalem also taught Gentiles to keep Jewish calendar observances including Sabbath and feast days (**Galatians 4:10**). These “agitators” as Paul called them, did not deny the need for faith. They did not teach that initial conversion required circumcision. They concurred with Paul that initial justification was based on faith (**Galatians 2:15-16**). But now that Gentiles had come to faith in Jesus the performance of some of the “works of the Law” was necessary in order to complete their faith (**Galatians 3:1-**

5 – “received you the Spirit from the works of the Law or from a hearing of faith? So foolish are ye, having begun in Spirit are you now *to be made complete by the flesh?*”).

Paul described this extra-Christian innovation as “compelling Gentiles to Judaize” or *to live like Jews* (**Galatians 3:14**). The controversy was centered on *questions about Gentile standing in God’s covenant people*. The immediate bone of contention was *circumcision*, not abstract theological debates over unmerited grace versus meritorious human works and efforts. The pressing question was: to be members in good standing of God’s covenant people must Gentile believers also add circumcision (and possibly other works of the Mosaic Law) to their new faith in Jesus? Was Christian life and growth to be governed by the Law or *Torah*?

Christianity grew out of the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was only natural that Jewish believers looked to the Law for criteria on what defined and delimited the people of God. Inevitably circumcision would become a critical question. It was the original sign of Yahweh’s covenant with Abraham. Proponents of circumcision had strong scriptural proof on their side (**Genesis 17:1-13**), and had not the Law already made provision for Gentiles to join God’s covenant people by undergoing circumcision and performing other works of the Law?

Paul did not charge his opponents with teaching Gentile believers to keep the entire Law. He did he accuse them of repudiating the necessity for faith (**Galatians 2:15-16**). This is partly why Paul responded by citing the Law’s requirement: those who accept the rule of *Torah* are obligated to keep it in its entirety (**Galatians 3:10, Deuteronomy 27:26, Galatians 5:2-3**). The Law is *an all-or-nothing proposition*. Among other things circumcision obligates one to keep the whole Law. The “agitators” in effect were advocating faith PLUS circumcision.

The letter’s main proposition is in **Galatians 2:15-21** where Paul laid out what he held in common with the agitators (**verses 15-16**), as well as key areas of disagreement (**verses 17-21**). At issue was not good works in general but a specific category of works, the “*works of the Law*.” Elsewhere Paul did speak of the necessity for good works by Christians and even referred to “the law of Christ” (**Galatians 6:2, 1 Corinthians 9:21**). In Galatians “works of the law” can only refer to requirements specified in the Mosaic Law.

In Galatians chapters 3 and 4 Paul developed his arguments in detail, beginning with an *argument from experience* (**Galatians 3:1-5**). In the beginning the Galatians received the Spirit after hearing the Gospel message and responding in faith without performing the “works of the Law” and when they were yet uncircumcised. The receipt of the Spirit was irrefutable proof that God had accepted Gentiles on the basis of faith, circumcised or not. Having “begun in the *Spirit*” it made no sense to continue on to completion via “the *flesh*” by adopting a *Torah*-observant lifestyle.

In **Galatians 3:6-14** Paul presented his first *argument from Scripture*. He appealed to the example of Abraham and linked Abraham to *faith* and promised *blessings* for Gentiles. He introduced key related topics including the definition of who is a true “son of Abraham,” that the inclusion of the Gentiles had been foretold to Abraham, and the curse of the Law. This section is linked to the immediately preceding one by the reference to *Spirit* in **verse 14**.

Abraham was reckoned righteous on the basis of his faith therefore those who are from faith are true “sons of Abraham.” God promised that in Abraham “the Gentiles would be blessed.” From the beginning God’s purpose was for “the blessing of Abraham to come to the Gentiles in Jesus Christ, in order that the promise of the Spirit might be received through the faith.” Paul thereby equated the “blessing of Abraham” with the “promise of the Spirit,” the

same Spirit Gentile believers had previously received by faith and without circumcision (**Galatians 3:1-4**).

In contrast to those who are from faith, those who are “from the works of the Law” inevitably place themselves under the Law’s curse. The Law declares that those under it are obligated “to continue in *ALL* things written in the Book of the Law, to perform them” (**Deuteronomy 27:26**). Gentile believers who contemplate adding circumcision to their repertoire of faith must understand that much more is required than just the removal of a man’s foreskin. *Torah* obligates covenant members to keep all that is written in it. Failure to do so puts one under its curse.

In **Galatians 3:15-18** Paul gave an argument derived from the idea of a covenant. The covenant with Abraham represented God’s original intent and irreversible will. A covenant once ratified “no one voids, appends or adds to it,” therefore the Law that “came into being four hundred and thirty years later does not invalidate or nullify” the earlier promise. The promise was given not just to Abraham but to “his seed,” singular, and that “seed” is Christ. The promised inheritance, which included blessings for Gentiles, is therefore not “on the basis of the works of the Law” but through “the promise to Abraham.”

In **Galatians 3:19-25** Paul answered the question: *Why, then, the law?* God added the Law after the covenant “because of transgressions,” “*until such time* as the seed came to whom the promise had been made.” Paul presented both a reason for the Law and *its expiration date*. The Law identified sin as “transgression” of specific laws. It remained in force until the “seed” or Christ arrived. The Law functioned as a custodian to guard Israel until the faith and the time of inheritance came (**Galatians 4:1-7**). Now that the “seed” had arrived the custodial function of the Law ceased. “The faith having come, we are no longer under a custodian” (**Galatians 3:25**).

The paragraph in **Galatians 3:27-29** sums up Paul’s argument to this point and draws several implications. God’s promise is on the basis of faith not works of the Law, therefore those who are “from faith” are the true “seed of Abraham” and “heirs of the promise.” Therefore things such as circumcision, ethnicity and gender are no longer relevant to one’s standing before God. Because those who were “baptized into Christ put on Christ” there no longer can be divisions and stratification in the covenant community because one is Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. All are “*one in Christ Jesus*.”

Though not explicitly stated, the clear implication of **Galatians 3:27-29** is that for those who are not “in Christ,” those who are still under the custodianship of the Law, such distinctions continue to matter very much.

— Separation: One Purpose of the Law —

The Law given to Israel through Moses was much more than a statement of theological principles or a set of moral codes designed to regulate individual behavior.

The classic summary statement of Yahweh’s covenant with Israel God declared:

Exodus 19:1-6, “...Now, therefore, if you will indeed hearken to my voice and *keep my covenant*, then shall *ye* be mine as *a treasure beyond all the peoples* for mine is all the earth. But you shall be mine as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak unto the sons of Israel.”

God designated Israel as His people chosen to be His treasure above all other nations. The Law was not simply a collection of moral precepts to govern individual behavior. Instead it was *a covenant* between Yahweh and *the entire nation of Israel* (the second person pronoun in the passage or “ye” is plural). In subsequent passages it is not individual Israelites that one-by-one accepted the covenant but the entire nation, which proclaimed in response, “all that Yahweh has commanded we will do.”

The Law of Moses was given to Israel, NOT to any other nation. The Law was specific to Israel and her obedience to it was vital for her continuing possession of the Promised Land. The Law included moral commandments and absolutes, but also much more. It was a national contract between Yahweh and Israel that included a sacrificial system, dietary restrictions, laws of inheritance, civil regulations, Levirate marriage, penal codes, etc. Some of its regulations were specific to Israel located in the land of Palestine (e.g., the Cities of Refuge).

One purpose of the Law was to keep Israel separate from surrounding pagan nations and free of ritual defilement. An example is the Levitical dietary code regarding “clean” and “unclean” meats. These regulations were to keep Israel distinct from its pagan neighbors and maintain its ritual purity:

Leviticus 20:24-26, “You shall inherit their land and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey. I am Yahweh your God *who has separated you from the nations. You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean beast and the unclean, and between the unclean bird and the clean*; you shall not make yourselves abominable by beast or by bird or by anything with which the ground teems, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. You shall be holy to me; for I, Yahweh, am holy and *have separated you from the nations that you should be mine.*”

The Levitical food laws were not given for hygienic reasons but to avoid pagan defilement. To eat forbidden meat or meat from animals improperly butchered was to risk ceremonial impurity. By the time of Jesus issues of food were of extreme importance within Second Temple Judaism, something to which the gospel accounts bear clear witness (**Matthew 9:10-11, 15:2, 15:20, Mark 2:16**). Simply avoiding prohibited food was not enough. To eat at table with others of questionable purity, especially uncircumcised Gentiles by very definition “unclean,” was to risk one’s own ritual purity.

A clear example of this kind of situation is found in the account when Peter took the gospel to Gentiles for the first time. In **Acts 10:19-33** Peter journeyed to Joppa to the house of a centurion named Cornelius. The centurion was not a hardened sinner but a devout man who worshiped the true God and loved Israel. Nonetheless, he remained uncircumcised. Upon entering Cornelius’ house Peter declared, “you well know how *it is unlawful for a Jew to join himself or come in to one of another race*. And yet God has shown me that I should be calling no man ‘common or unclean’” (**verse 28**). Upon his return to Jerusalem some Jewish believers criticized Peter, not because he fellowshipped with gross sinners but because “*he went in unto uncircumcised men and ate with them*” (**Acts 11:1-3**)!

Another example is found in chapter 2 of Galatians. Paul described a previous incident at the church in the city of Antioch, one also disrupted by agitators from Jerusalem. In Galatia the chief issue was circumcision. In Antioch the uproar was over issues of food and table fellowship. In Antioch Peter’s practice was to eat “together with Gentiles.” However, after “certain men came from James” Peter withdrew from table fellowship “with those of the

Gentiles” and “kept himself separate, fearing they of the circumcision.” The peer pressure was so great that “even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy.” In the end Paul had to confront Peter to his face over his pretense ([Galatians 2:11-14](#)).

In Paul’s time to refuse to eat with someone was to give great offense. This was true in both Jewish and the larger Greco-Roman society. Additionally, Jews refused to eat with uncircumcised Gentiles to avoid defilement. The actions of Peter and others at Antioch, intentional or not, insinuated that something about Gentile believers was defective or even defiling. Church unity and free fellowship could not be maintained in such circumstances and, though Paul never raised the issue, there were implications regarding joint participation by Jewish and Gentile believers in the Lord’s Supper, as well as the communal meal that accompanied it ([1 Corinthians 11:17-34](#)).

The religion of Israel was not closed to all but ethnic Jews. The Law provided the means whereby a Gentile could join himself to the Jewish faith. But this included circumcision, taking on the obligations of Torah and otherwise becoming a full-fledged Jewish proselyte. Furthermore, circumcision was not optional since it was the fundamental sign of Yahweh’s covenant with Abraham ([Genesis 17:11](#)).

— Social Implications for the Church — “*You are All One in Christ*”

[Galatians 3:26-29](#), “For you *all* are sons of God through the faith in Christ Jesus, for *as many as* were baptized into Christ did put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is not male and female; for *you are all one* in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, heirs according to promise.”

In Galatians Paul is not concerned with improving or reforming the surrounding Greco-Roman society. His focus is on matters of internal relationships in the church of God and the maintenance of Christian unity. The questions at play concern the identity of true “sons of God” and children of Abraham. Who are the real heirs of the promised blessings of the covenant? Must Gentile believers get circumcised, take on the yoke of *Torah* and become Jewish proselytes in order to be children of Abraham and members in good standing of God’s covenant people?

Regardless of the social norms and practices of the surrounding society, what God accomplished in Jesus Christ carries certain implications for social relationships within the Body of Christ. In [Galatians 3:26-29](#) Paul addresses his words to all members of the church at Galatia, to everyone “baptized into Christ.” In [verses 26](#) “all” is in the emphatic position in the Greek sentence, as also is “as many as” in [verse 27](#) (Greek, *hosoi*). Likewise “all,” “you” and “one” in [verse 28](#) are each emphatic. The emphasis throughout is on *all*: what Paul says applies to all, to everyone who “has put on Christ.” A consequence of faith in Jesus is that there no longer can be divisions in the church on the basis of ethnicity, social and economic class, or gender. All stand before God on an equal basis – faith. In response to faith God accepts all and gives each one the same Spirit regardless of nationality, economic status, race, culture or gender.

This does not mean that all gender or ethnic distinctions have ceased. Individuals continue to be identifiable as Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. Paul is not attempting to eliminate all gender distinctions, but as to proper standing before God in this new religious community no one has an advantage because of ethnicity, gender or class. It could not be

otherwise since God justifies all on the same basis: not social distinctions, not works of the Mosaic Law, *but on the basis of the faith of Jesus Christ* ([Galatians 2:15-21](#)). This equality before God is reinforced in the last clause of [verse 28](#), “for *all you* are *one* in Christ Jesus.” Paul stresses the unity necessary for a properly constituted and functioning congregation of God.

The pronoun “you” in [verse 29](#) is plural and the same group is addressed as in the preceding verses. This one group consists of Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus, men and women, bond and free. All are true children of Abraham, therefore each and everyone is an equal heir to the promised blessings of Abraham.

Because in this letter Paul combats certain Jewish-Christian agitators who insisted that Gentiles must become Jewish proselytes to be complete members of God’s people, the need for Paul to conclude that “in Christ” there cannot be “Jew or “Greek” is self-evident. But often overlooked are the social implications of the other two pairs: “slave and free,” “male and female.”

● Neither Slave Nor Free ●

While the Law of Moses did not formally endorse or promote slavery, it did accept it as a social institution within Israel. The Mosaic Law regulated slavery and slaves were generally treated more humanely within Judaism than they were in the wider the Greco-Roman world. Nonetheless, the Law made a sharp distinction between Jewish and Gentile slaves ([Leviticus 25:39-55](#)). A Jewish slave in Israel was to be treated by his master as a hired hand or resident alien ([Leviticus 25:40](#)), since both slave and master were members of Israel and therefore brothers. All Jewish slaves were to be released at the start of the Year of Jubilee and compensated for their years of service ([Leviticus 25:40-54](#)). Additionally, Jews who sold themselves into slavery were to be released in the next Sabbatical year after six or less years of service ([Jeremiah 34:14](#)).

No such provision for the release of Gentile slaves was included in the *Torah*. Gentile slave status was for life or until voluntarily freed by a master. Children of Gentile slaves born in a master’s household belonged to the master for life ([Leviticus 25:44-46](#)). Gentile slaves were property not brethren. Strict adherence to the Law would bring further divisions and stratification between free and slave members in the church. The distinction in status in the *Torah* between Jewish and Gentile slaves reinforced the unequal standing of Jew and Gentile in Judaism. The claim that in Christ there cannot be “slave or free” flows naturally from Paul’s declaration that there cannot be “Jew or Greek,” as well as from the larger debate over the status and function of the Law for believers in Jesus Christ.

● Not Male and Female ●

In both religious matters and social status females under the *Torah* were at a disadvantage to males. The center of Israel’s worship was the Temple in Jerusalem where the presence of Yahweh dwelt in the central sanctuary or “holy of holies.” Only the high priest could enter the inner sanctuary and then only once each year on the Day of Atonement ([Hebrews 9:7](#)). Only properly constituted priests could officiate before the altar located in the inner courts closest to the holy of holies. Next closest to the sanctuary was the Court of Men, which was reserved for male Israelites in a state of ceremonial purity.

The closest female Israelites could come to the presence of Yahweh was the Court of Women, located at slightly more distance from the sanctuary than the Court of Men. They were kept at a further distance from God's presence than male Israelites. Furthermore, women were ceremonially unclean for several days each month during their menstrual cycle (**Leviticus 15:19-33**). In this unclean state a woman was unable not only to enter the Temple, she could not even participate fully in communal affairs and religious activities at her local synagogue during his time of uncleanness since persons and things touched by her were also rendered "unclean." Thus women in Israel could not participate as fully or freely in the nation's worship and religious life as male members of the covenant community.

If the Galatians took on the full burden of *Torah* this would ultimately result in limitations on female members fully participating in the worship life of the church. Moreover, such a situation implied that female members of the covenant community are in some sense second-class citizens in the Kingdom of God.

— Concluding Remarks —

In **Galatians 5:3** Paul gave solemn warning that "every man who gets circumcised is a debtor to do the whole law." This reiterates and expands a warning given previously in **Galatians 3:10**: "For as many as are from the works of the Law are under a curse, for it is written, 'Accursed is everyone that continues not in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them.'" There Paul cited **Deuteronomy 27:26** to emphasize that once one is under the Law one is obligated to keep the whole thing. *The Mosaic Law is an all-or-nothing proposition*. Failure to keep the entire Law brings one under the Law's curse.

Today there is a growing movement among many Christians to observe the Law or *Torah*, or at least parts of it. Those who would take on the yoke of the Law need to be fully cognizant of just what they obligating themselves to do (**Galatians 5:1**). Simply keeping the Sabbath, eating only kosher meats or observing the Feasts of Israel is not the end of the matter.

The more the church implements the obligations of the Law the more certain social implications come to the surface. While the reinstatement of slavery in the twenty-first century is a very remote possibility, the Mosaic Law does reinforce divisions between Jews and Gentiles, and it puts female members at a religious disadvantage effectively making them second-class citizens of the Kingdom. This stands in great tension with the Gospel's stipulation that "in Christ" all believers are one and each individual Christian is a true child of Abraham regardless of ethnicity, nationality, social and economic status, and gender.

In **Galatians 3:27-29** Paul expresses a concern found elsewhere in his letters and in other books of the New Testament: *the necessity to keep the unity of the faith* (e.g., **John 17:21**, **1 Corinthians 12:12**, **Ephesians 2:13-22**, **4:4**). The Law or *Torah* among other things was intended to build a hedge around Israel to keep her separate from the surrounding pagan nations and their religious impurities. This was a necessary step in God's redemption plan. As Paul himself argues in **Galatians 3:23-26**, the Law functioned as a custodian to keep Israel "in ward and shut up until the faith should be revealed." The Law was to be Israel's "guardian" until the "seed" arrived, that is, Christ. Now that Christ has arrived the time of the custodianship of the Law has come to an end and the Gospel has been opened up to people of every nation, race and tribe (**Revelation 5:9**).

A Christian faith lived in accordance with the dictates and regulations of the *Torah* leads inevitably to division, stratification and fragmentation in the Church, not the glorious Unity envisioned in the New Testament.