

The Requirement to Do the Whole Law (If You Are Under It)

By David Maas

— Background —



Rising voices in the contemporary church are encouraging Christians to adopt some of the practices and requirements of the Law of Moses or *Torah*. This can include observing the Sabbath and other Jewish holy days, adhering to a kosher diet and so on. While one can gain a better understanding of early Christianity by studying the ancient faith of Israel from which Christianity sprang, potential consequences result from going beyond this by submitting to or living by the stipulations of *Torah*, and some of these consequences are potentially quite dire.

In his letter to the Galatians Paul responded to certain Jewish Christians from Jerusalem who had infiltrated the house churches of Galatia with disruptive teachings, in particular the claim that male Gentile believers must be circumcised (**Galatians 2:3, 5:2-3, 6:12-13**). Possibly they also required believers to keep calendar observances such as Sabbath (**Galatians 4:10**). They did not deny the need for faith or teach that initial conversion was based on circumcision. Rather, once Gentiles had come to faith in Jesus, performing “works of the Law” or *Torah* became necessary to go on to complete their faith (**Galatians 3:1-5** – “received ye 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 would have none of it. He described the teaching of these “agitators” as “compelling Gentiles to Judaize,” that is, to live like Jews (**Galatians 3:14**). The infinitive translated “to judaize” (*Ioudaizo*) occurs only in Galatians in the New Testament. It is from a Greek word, meaning, “to live like a Jew, to adopt a Jewish lifestyle.” Some Jewish Christians from Jerusalem were pressuring Gentiles to conform to certain Jewish practices.

Rather than an abstract theological debate over unmerited grace versus meritorious human works, *the controversy at Galatia was focused on questions about Gentile standing in God’s covenant people and the immediate bone of contention was circumcision*. In order to be and remain a member in good standing of God’s covenant people, must a Gentile believer add circumcision and other works of the Mosaic Law to his faith in Jesus?

This development is no surprise. The first disciples were all Jewish and initially the gospel was open only to Jews. Only after events recorded in Acts chapter 10 was the Gospel thrown open to uncircumcised Gentiles. The church did not view itself as a new religion distinct from Judaism, but an outgrowth and fulfillment of Israel’s ancestral faith. Jesus was the promised Messiah and the new “way” established by him was linked to God’s previous covenant. Sooner or later the question would arise: *what is the basis on which Gentile believers are acceptable members of God’s covenant people?*

The movement begun by Jesus was descended from the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was only natural that some Jewish believers would look to the Law for criteria on what defined and delimited the people of God now that Israel’s messiah had arrived. Inevitably

circumcision would become a pivotal question. It was the original sign of Yahweh's covenant with Abraham. Proponents of circumcision had strong scriptural proof texts on their side (**Genesis 17:1-13**). Besides, had not the Law already made provision for Gentiles to join God's covenant people by undergoing circumcision and keeping other requirements of the *Torah*?

— Paul's Response —

Paul did not charge his opponents with compelling Gentiles to keep the entire Law. Some verses in Galatians indicate his opponents were insisting that Gentiles keep only certain requirements of *Torah*, specifically circumcision and probably Sabbath (and other holy days), but not necessarily every requirement of the Law (**Galatians 3:10, 5:2-3**).

The agitators were Jewish believers in Jesus. They did not deny the necessity for faith (**Galatians 2:15-16**). Their position was in effect that circumcision and possibly other "works of the Law" must be *added to faith* in Jesus to have a complete and legitimate form of the faith (**Galatians 3:1-4**).

Paul's main proposition is found in **Galatians 2:15-21** where he laid out what he held in common with his Jewish opponents (**verses 15-16**) then summarized the main areas of disagreement (**verses 17-21**). He began by spelling out the basis on which a man or woman is acquitted before God:

"We ourselves by nature Jews and not sinners from among the Gentiles, know that man is not declared righteous *on the basis of the works of the law* but *through the faith of Christ Jesus*; even we believed in Christ Jesus that we might be declared righteous *on the basis of the faith of Christ* and *not on the basis of the works of the law*; because from the works of the law will no flesh be declared righteous."

The proposition begins in the Greek sentence with an emphatic pronoun, "*we ourselves*." Rather than a rhetorical statement Paul is stating an understanding with which he and other Jewish believers in Jesus agreed, namely, that a man is not put in right standing with God "on the basis of the works of the Law" but instead on the basis of faith. This was common ground. The agitators were adding requirements to this necessary faith. As Paul pointed out, even Jewish believers initially responded to the Gospel by exercising faith in Jesus ("*even we believed in Christ Jesus*"). The opponents were not advocating legalism *per se*, but faith PLUS additional requirements.

At issue in Galatians was not *good works and human effort in general*, but a specific category of works, the "works of the Law." Elsewhere Paul spoke of the necessity for good works by Christians and could even refer to "the law of Christ" (**Galatians 6:2, 1 Corinthians 9:21**). He did not oppose the abstract principle of law or devalue good works or human effort in general. In the context of this letter "works of the law" can only refer to specific requirements of the Mosaic Law.

In Galatians chapters 3 and 4 Paul presented arguments in support of his proposition. He began with an *argument from experience* (**Galatians 3:1-5**), pointing to the Galatians own receipt of the Spirit after responding in faith to the Gospel message. This occurred without benefit of the "works of the Law" and while they were in an uncircumcised state. The receipt of the Spirit was irrefutable proof that God had accepted Gentiles on the basis of faith, that they were acceptable AS UNCIRCUMCISED GENTILES. Having thus "begun in the *Spirit*," did

they actually believe they could go on to completion by means of “the *flesh*,” that is, by adding the “works of the Law” to their faith?

— Doing the Whole Law —

Galatians 3:10-13, “For as many as are from the works of the Law are under a curse, for it is written, ‘Accursed is everyone who continues not in all things that are written in the book of the law, to do them.’”

In **Galatians 3:6-14** Paul presents *arguments from Scripture*, appealing in the first instance to the example of Abraham and linking Abraham to *faith, righteousness* and promised *blessing* for Gentiles (**verses 6-9**). Abraham was reckoned righteous on the basis of faith (“just as Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him for righteousness”) and therefore those who are from faith are true “sons of Abraham.” In **verses 6-9** Paul deals with a particular category, those “from faith.”

In **Galatians 3:10** Paul presents a second argument from scripture. In contrast to those “from faith,” those who are “from the works of the Law” inevitably place themselves under the Law’s curse. The Law itself pronounces that those under it are obligated “to continue in *ALL* the things written in the Book of the Law, to do them” (**Deuteronomy 27:26**). *The Law is not a pick-and-choose menu but an all-or-nothing proposition*. If one is under *Torah* just observing Sabbath or undergoing circumcision is insufficient to avoid the Law’s curse.

Gentile believers contemplating the addition of circumcision to their faith must understand that much more is involved than just the removal of foreskin. The *Torah* itself requires members of the covenant to do *all* that is written in it. Those who are living on the basis of the works of the Law fall under its curse. At Mount Sinai Israel willingly placed herself under the obligations of the covenant (**Exodus 24:3-7**) and thereby also potentially under the Law’s curse, which is pronounced against all who fail to continue in all its requirements.ⁱ Wittingly or not, the Gentile Galatians were considering a similar decision, one with potentially dire consequences.

In Galatians Paul connects the preposition “under” or *hupo* (Greek) directly or indirectly to the Law ten times *and always negatively*. Thus he refers to those who are “under sin” (**3:22**), “under the Law” (**3:23, 4:4, 4:5, 4:21, 5:18**), “under a custodian” (**3:25**), “under guardians” (**4:2**), and “under the elemental principles” of the world (**4:3**). Those who are “under the Law” are not classified as people “from faith.” Instead they stand in need of redemption “from under the Law” (**4:5**).

Paul’s argument is covenantal or salvation historical. He is not arguing against the keeping of just one or a few specific laws, or doing good works in general, but his “argument is against observance of a specific kind of works—works of the Mosaic Law in general.”ⁱⁱ The passage from Deuteronomy specifies that everyone who is under the Law and does not continue to do all the things written therein inevitably come under its curse. “This curse has nothing to do with general human fallen-ness but more specifically with being a Mosaic Law breaker, and thus it applies only to those who are ‘under the Law’. If the Galatians submit to the Mosaic Law they will also indeed be subject to such a curse, if, that is, they fail to keep all the Law.”ⁱⁱⁱ

— Consequences of Submission to *Torah* —

Galatians 5:2-3, “Behold! I, Paul, am saying to you, if you get circumcised Christ will benefit you nothing. Moreover, I bear solemn witness again to every man getting circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law.”

In **Galatians 5:2-4** Paul’s language becomes emphatic and severe. If Gentile believers choose to get circumcised Jesus and his work on the cross will cease to benefit them. Instead they will need to keep the entire Law of Moses because submission to circumcision places them under the Mosaic covenant. As one commentator elaborates:

“Paul is telling his converts here that if they submit to circumcision and the Mosaic covenant then they have excluded themselves from the other covenant to which they were already party—the new covenant. These are mutually exclusive covenants with differing stipulations and benefits...What then is the connection between Christ’s death or the offense of the cross (5.11) and the keeping of the Mosaic covenant? Simply this: Christ by his death has endured the curse of the Law covenant so no one else would have to endure it, and by doing so rendered the covenant’s sanctions fulfilled, finished, over and done with, and thereafter null and void. In Paul’s view, God only has one covenant, one agreement about relationship between himself and his people, at a time. To submit to the Mosaic covenant is to imply clearly that the covenant inaugurated by Christ is null and void.”^{iv}

In **verse 3** Paul adds an oath for emphasis (“I bear solemn witness”) and reiterates what he has just said in **verse 2**, though worded differently (“again”). Since Paul emphasizes that circumcision obligates one to keep the whole Law, the implication is that his Jewish-Christian opponents had failed to mention this fact to the Galatians.

The severe consequences of the Galatians’ contemplated course are made clear in **verse 4**: “you have been set aside from Christ, you who are to be declared righteous on the basis of the Law, you have fallen from grace.” Submitting to *Torah* and obligating oneself to do all the “works of the Law” *after* one has come to faith in Christ, is tantamount to apostasy.

— Summary Remarks —

One commentator has remarked:

“Anyone who chooses to abide by the Jewish Torah in order to secure participation in Abraham’s ‘blessing’ is placed in a situation where he or she is threatened instead with a ‘curse’ since the Law itself pronounces a curse on anyone who fails to live up to every single one of its requirements.”^v

While it may be popular and even *fun* for modern Christians to go through the motions of conforming to the *Torah* or Mosaic Law, they must understand the potential consequences of doing so. Once one is under the authority of the Law one is obligated to keep all its requirements. A Christian cannot pick and choose which laws are applicable or still in force; contrary to what some might assume, some laws and regulations are not optional but others mandatory. Once under *Torah* if one fails to keep the whole Law one comes under its curse. The Law is not simply a set of ethical principles or moral absolutes that govern individual behavior.

It is the terms of the covenant between God and Israel, one that comes with covenant obligations. To break a covenant is to commit a most profound transgression.

In the letter's main proposition in **Galatians 2:21** Paul declared, "if righteousness is through the Law, then Christ died in vain." Those who teach that faith in what God has done in the death and resurrection of Jesus is insufficient grounds for determining membership in God's covenant people or governing how they are to live, effectively declare Christ's unjust death by crucifixion deficient.

FOOTNOTES:

ⁱ Richard Longenecker, *Galatians* (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), p. 117.

ⁱⁱ J. Barclay, *Obeying the Truth*, p. 94. Compare Ben Withington, *Grace in Galatia* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 232.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ben Withington, *Grace in Galatia* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 233.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, pp. 366-367.

^v C. Stanley, *Under a Curse: A Fresh Reading of Galatians 3:10-14* (NTS 36, 1990), p. 500.