

Do Christians have to keep the Law today?

“For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Galatians 2:19-20

The Apostle Paul’s proposition and defense of the law are explained at the theological center of Galatians. Paul makes clear that the Law was given because of transgressions and that it could not give life to those who observed it. Malcolm Muggeridge said, “The depravity of man is at once the most empirically verifiable reality but at the same time the most intellectually resisted fact.”¹ Everything is imprisoned under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

In favor of his argument for the theological allegiance of Galatian followers of Jesus Christ, Paul refutes agitators who believed in adhering to Mosaic Law in general and that Gentiles needed to be circumcised. Longenecker and Still said, “In their theological arsenal was a passage of Scripture that was explicit in its requirement to observe unfalteringly everything written in the Mosaic Law.”² Paul noted that the agitators likely referred to the curse pronounced on anyone who did not continue to do everything written in the Mosaic Law (Deuteronomy 27:26), the opposite of what he seemed to advocate in Galatians 3:10.

The fundamental difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant is the complete impossibility of self-justification, a fact that Jesus Christ supported. Paul writes (v.23-26), “Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.” Under the Old Covenant, the nation of Israel was required to obey the Law. Blessings or curses would be the result of obedience. On the other hand, the New Covenant is administered by grace, not obedience, and its application is different.

Christians who are justified by faith in Christ alone keep the law today. Key to incorporating this fact in the New Covenant is “but Christ lives in me (v.20).” The insight is the believer’s faith in the Son of God – “His indwelling presence in me.” Paul’s explanation moves from theology to ethics. Dr. Stacey said, “If righteousness is an inside-out affair, as Paul asserted, and not an outside-in affair, then Jesus’ followers live out their faith by fulfilling the self-given law of love after the pattern of Christ who has been formed in them by the Spirit other than living by external constraints that are purely material.”³

¹ Muggeridge, Malcolm. *Jesus Rediscovered*. Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1969. Print.

² Longenecker, Bruce W., and Todd D. Still. 2014. *Thinking through Paul: an Introduction to His Life, Letters, and Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan: 90.

³ https://learn.liberty.edu/bbcswebdav/pid-36344677-dt-content-rid-439796209_1/courses/NBST520_B09_202020/Updated%20Presentations/Module%206/Corinthians%20and%20Galatians/res/index.html

Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:17, 20). “The New Covenant was viewed as not a mere renewal of the Mosaic Covenant but a genuinely fresh start, a different covenant.”⁴

“But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known.” That is to say, the righteousness of God that transcends the ages, the very character of God, his perfect righteousness, has now been disclosed or made known not in the framework of the old law-covenant with its sacrificial system and its priesthood and so forth. God’s righteousness has now been made known apart from that. To use language that Paul uses elsewhere, what he is saying is, “We have now arrived at the new covenant; now a new frame of reference, a new covenant has arrived.” He has not yet explained how it is grounded or how it works.

But that does not mean that this new situation is entirely off the old law-covenant, for Paul adds an interesting clause at the end of verse 21: “But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify” (emphasis added). That is, if you read the Old Testament carefully and listen well, you will see that the law-covenant that Moses gave actually anticipated what is coming now. For example, the blood of bull and goat borne by the high priest into the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, pointed toward the ultimate sacrifice that pays for sin, the sacrifice of Christ.

⁴ Witherington, Ben. 2018. *Torah Old and New: Exegesis, Intertextuality, and Hermeneutics*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press: 284.