

Paul's View of the Law

A Historical Survey and Examination of Biblical Data

I. HISTORY OF PAUL'S VIEW OF THE LAW

A. *Old Testament*

1. **Through Moses**, God gave Israel a catalog of regulations relating to almost every aspect of life (Casillas 39). It was part of a conditional covenant. The ratification ceremony in Deuteronomy 27-28 listed blessings tied to obedience and curses tied to disobedience.
Besides regulations, the Law also contained instructions for the priesthood and the sacrificial system. Thus, the Law was all about sin: identifying it and covering it.
2. **The Psalmists** meditated on the Law and loved it (Ps. 1.1; 119.17). They did not see the Law as a spirit-crushing burden, but as God's good revelation
3. **The Prophets** constantly rebuked Israel and Judah for forsaking the Law (Jer. 9.13-15; Ezk. 22.6; Hos. 8.1; Hab. 1.4; Zeph. 3.4). Yet they did not seek only an external return to sacrifice and ritual, but heart-obedience (Hos. 6.4-6).
4. **Sanders** labels the Law's role in Judaism "covenantal nomism" and defines it: The 'pattern' or 'structure' of covenantal nomism is this: (1) God has chosen Israel and (2) given the law. The law implies both (3) God's promise to maintain the election and (4) the requirement to obey. (5) God rewards obedience and punished transgression. (6) The law provides for means of atonement, and atonement results in (7) maintenance or re-establishment of the covenantal relationship. (8) All those who are maintained in the covenant by obedience, atonement and God's mercy belong to the group who will be saved (Sanders, *Palestinian* 422). In a word, the point of the Law was holiness. By keeping the Law, Israel would reflect the uniqueness of the God who chose her (Ex. 19.4-6).

B. *Pre-Pauline*

1. **Sadducees** recognized the divine origin of the written Law only (Mantel 56).
2. **Pharisees** claimed that Hillel taught that "what is hateful to thee, do not unto thy fellow; this is the whole law. All the rest is a commentary" (Rodkinson 50). Yet, they still multiplied the Law into thousands of pages of Talmudic regulations.

C. *Reformation*

1. **Luther** was, like the other Reformers, opposed to legalism. He denied the legitimacy of civil, ceremonial, and moral law for believers.
"The righteous has no need of any law to admonish or constrain him; without constraint of the law, he willingly does those things which the law requires... To them therefore the law is utterly abolished, and has no right to accuse them. They have received the Holy Ghost by faith, who will not suffer them to be idle. Although the flesh resist, yet they walk after the Spirit" (Luther 381).
2. **Calvin** too was opposed to Roman legalism. He, however, maintained that observing the moral law was appropriate for believers (Calvin 225).

D. *Post-Reformation*

1. **Bultmann** took Luther's ideas about the abolishment of the Law and pushed them further, claiming that even the desire to obey the Law was sinful (Bultmann 267).
2. **Cranfield** continued Calvin's interpretation, arguing that the moral aspects of the Law were not abolished at Christ's coming (Cranfield 43-48).

E. *New Perspective*

1. **Sanders** claims that Second Temple Judaism was not a legalistic religion at all and that "works of the Law" were simply acts of gratitude toward a God who graciously elected Israel: "covenantal nomism" (Sanders *Palestinian* 422).
2. **Dunn** believes that Judaism's error with the Law was not legalism or self-righteousness, but nationalistic / ethnic boasting (Dunn 192).

F. *Contemporary Conservative*

1. **Theilman** maintains that Judaism was not legalistic, though it was too optimistic about human ability (Theilman 240). The believer is free from the law and fulfills the law (242). "The Mosaic law is absorbed by the gospel, but only under the transforming influence of the eschatological Spirit" (243). The Law does not stand alone in a regulative function, but the Spirit applies its principles and timeless truths in the lives of New Covenant believers.
2. **Westerholm** holds that Paul believed "that the way of the Torah had failed because men and women had transgressed its demands" and that currently "its demands have no force" (Westerholm 221).
3. **Schreiner** concludes that (contra Sanders) Paul was combating a degree of Jewish legalism and that "the commandments in the Mosaic Law ... no longer function in the same way" (Schreiner 244). He hints at the need for more research to apply the Mosaic law "creatively."

II. OVERVIEW OF PAUL'S VIEW OF THE LAW

A. *Definitions*

1. Old Testament writings (Pentateuch)
2. Mosaic law – most frequent (Westerholm 106, Schreiner 34)
3. Legalism, Jewish abuse of original law – this use is not found without qualification (Westerholm 106)
4. Principle, precept

B. *Occurrences of νόμος in Paul*

Romans has the most references: 74 occurrences. Chapters 2 and 7 hold the highest concentration of "law." Galatians has 32 occurrences, but because of its length, it's more densely packed than Romans. I Corinthians has nine, several of which are merely introductory formula for Old Testament quotations. Philippians has 3; I Timothy has two and Ephesians has one.

Several other epistles refer to related topics, but this outline will be limited to occurrences of the word νόμος.

C. *Book emphases*

1. Galatians

a. *Background*

Paul faced a serious problem with Judaizers in Galatia and spoke very strongly against their legalism. Consequently he does not praise the Law but argues against it in order to curb its abuse.

b. *Works of the Law cannot justify.*

In 2.15-16 and 3.10-14, Paul contrasts works of the Law with faith in Christ. The difference is clear: faith justifies; Law does not. In fact the Law brings a curse for anyone who does not keep its every command. Christ kept its demands *and* bore its curse; faith in Him justifies.

A second contrast appears in 3.16-17: Law vs. promise. Paul argues that because the promise to Abraham preceded the Mosaic Law by over 400 years, the promise has precedence. The Law is not in competition with (κατά - Bruce 260) the promise, however. The Law cannot provide. The Law was given “because of transgressions” until the arrival of the promised Seed.

c. *The Law was temporary.*

“The Law was our schoolmaster (παιδαγωγός)” is frequently misunderstood (3.24). It has no reference to “using Law to convince someone that he needs Christ” in the evangelistic context that comes to our minds all too quickly. Rather it is a statement about the Law’s temporary function as a guardian for God’s people from Sinai to Christ (Schreiner 79). The Seed of the promise (3.16) would bring life (2.20) through His Spirit (6.8). The Law was never intended to bring life. On the contrary, it revealed sin, holding Israel captive as they waited for Messiah (3.23).

d. *The Law is slavery.*

Paul extends the captivity idea of the παιδαγωγός by pointing out that a son under his guardian was no better than a slave (4.1). He asks the Galatians if they wish to turn away from full sonship in Christ’s redemption to slavery under the rule of the Law. The contrast to this slavery is the filial dependence that the Spirit teaches us. Instead of bondage, we experience paternal affection from God. Paul pushes the slavery theme unmistakably farther with the Hagar-Sarah illustration (4.21-31). The Law is Hagar, flesh, and slavery; freedom is Sarah, the Spirit, and promise.

e. *Law-keeping is falling from grace.*

While in the broad sense, the Law (like all of Scripture) is evidence of God’s grace to unworthy sinners, Paul argues that a life of Law-keeping (i.e., circumcision in this context) is not a life of grace. We need righteousness: that comes through the Spirit by faith.

f. *The Spirit leads; the Law does not control.*

When we are led by the Spirit, the Law is not our superior or controller (5.18). A Judaizer might combat the works of the flesh (5.19-21) with works of the Law, but Paul combats those fleshly works with the fruit of the Spirit (5.22-23). Verse 23 is often misunderstood. It does not mean “no one passes laws against love, joy, et al.” It means that the Law is not against the Spirit’s fruit. It is quite possible that Paul again intends κατά to indicate that the Law cannot compete successfully against the Spirit (BDAG); it is also possible that κατά means “over

against” with the idea of regulation (Luther 381) or condemnation (Westerholm 129).

g. *Love fulfills the Law.*

Paul states this truth plainly in 5.14 and then cites a tangible evidence of love (bearing each others’ burdens) in 6.2.

h. *Summary*

The Law was temporary and unable to justify; in fact, it constituted slavery. Trying to keep the Law is inconsonant with grace, the Spirit’s leading, and love.

2. Romans

a. *Background*

We don’t have evidence of a particular struggle against Law-abuse or legalism per se in the Roman church. Paul’s mention of the Law in this book primarily has to do with how Law intersects with faith and justification. If anything, Paul is concerned to correct arrogant Gentiles (Thielman 162) and his teaching on the Law may be more favorable than in Galatia.

b. *The Law must be done.*

2.13: “It is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.” The Law is not a matter of mere belief, doctrine or viewpoint; doing (ποιητής) is required. The implication then for NT Christians is that, if the Law were still binding, it would not be binding merely in an informative way, but in a lifestyle-regulating way.

c. *The Law condemns both Jew and Gentile.*

Jews may think that possessing the Law grants them special privilege, but because they’ve “sinned under the Law [they] will be judged by the Law” (2.12). Gentiles might object that they’re not accountable to a Law they’ve never been given, but there is enough Law in their consciences to lead them to obey. Since their obedience is imperfect, they too are guilty (2.13-15). A corollary truth to this condemnation is that works of the Law do not justify anyone (3.20).

d. *The Law was meant to increase transgressions.*

“The Law entered in order to increase transgressions” (5.20). This is a surprise: we normally think about God giving revelation for a “good” reason. Here Paul explicitly states the purpose (ἵνα) as increasing sin. This serves a larger purpose: increasing the reign of grace (5.21).

e. *The Law does not rule over Christians.*

Surprisingly, Paul draws a parallel between the Law and sin in Rom. 6.14. Sin having no dominion is linked clearly to being not under the law. This is not a perfect parallel; sin and the Law are not interchangeable terms. The link is this: life “under the Law” produces an unavoidable awareness of “sin’s dominion.” The connecting idea between sin and the Law in this verse is authority. Paul’s point is simple: sin no longer rules over believers because the Law no longer rules over believers. Grace rules instead. This thought continues into chapter 7. Paul’s marriage-death illustration makes this point: “we are released from the Law” (7.6).

f. *The Law is not bad.*

This is an important clarification. Paul makes two very negative statements about the Law: it arouses sinful passions (7.5) and its commandments prove to

be death (7.10). Those statements are immediately balanced: the Law is holy, righteous, good, and spiritual (7.12, 14). God gave the Law and there is nothing wrong with it. People have a problem with the Law because of their sin. When Law and sin get together, sin comes alive and produces death (7.13-14). Were it not for sin, keeping the Law would not be a problem in the slightest.

g. *The Spirit takes the reins from the Law.*

Romans 8.2 presents an important contrast: the law (ruling principle) of the Spirit sets Christians free from the “Law of sin and death” (a reference to the Mosaic Law, referring back to chapter 7). This is a clear parallel to Paul’s teaching in Galatians: the indwelling Spirit rules a believer’s life, not an external code of law. This comparison highlights another contrast: “freedom” (ἐλευθερώω) is the state of not being under Law.

Again, Paul prevents his readers from going too far in this idea of freedom. While believers are free from the Law, God has redeemed us so that the “righteous requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us” (8.4). Moral laxity is no option under the Spirit’s reign. The thing that fulfills the Law in believers, however, is not attentiveness to the Law; it is Spirit-mindedness (8.5-6).

h. *Pursuing the Law cannot effect righteousness.*

This is the failure of the Jewish nation, according to Paul. They pursued the Law (with its essential works – 2.13) and, lacking faith, stumbled (9.31-32). This is a race metaphor (Thielman 205-6). Their problem was related to righteousness and faith. They tried to set up their own (based on pursuing works of the Law) and stumbled before they reached the finish line: Christ, who is righteousness for those with faith (10.2-4). This puts Law in perspective for the whole book. The Gospel is about righteousness through faith in Christ (1.16-17). The Jews tried for righteousness by Law-works without faith.

i. *Love fulfills the Law.*

Previously, Paul spoke of believers fulfilling the Law under the reign of the Spirit. Now he boils the ethic of the Law into one word: love (13.10). Murder, theft, adultery, etc, do not happen when believers love.

j. *Summary*

The Law did not produce righteousness; it exacerbated sin. Believers are not bound by the Law; they love under the Spirit’s rule.

3. **Other Epistles**

a. *I Corinthians*

- Living like those who hold the Law is appropriate if it facilitates evangelism (9.20).
- The Law is sin’s power (15.56).

b. *Ephesians*

- In order to make peace between Jews and Gentiles, the “Law of commandments expressed in ordinances” was abolished (2.15).

c. *Philippians*

- Paul’s Law-observance was rubbish compared to knowing Christ (3.5-10).

d. *I Timothy*

- The Law is good if used appropriately. It was laid down for sinners (1.8-9).

III. ISSUES WITH PAUL'S VIEW OF THE LAW

A. ***How can something inspired be set aside? How can David call the law good and Paul call it bad?***

Paul doesn't answer this question specifically, aside from his comments about the Law's historically limited purpose. He does, however, call the Law good, righteous, holy, and spiritual. Perhaps a better question would be "how can Paul call the law good (Rom. 7.12) and identify it as a form of slavery that provokes sin (Gal. 4; Rom. 5.20)?"

Some commentators including Hübner, Seiffert, Clemen, and Drane (Hübner 2-9) identify this as a discrepancy between Galatians and Romans and seek to answer it in terms of Paul's psychological or theological development. This approach borders on oversimplification. The problem is not a matter of Paul speaking positively of the Law in Romans and negatively in Galatians: it is a matter of Paul speaking positively and negatively of the Law in Romans and more negatively in Galatians.

The answer is found in the problem facing each church when Paul writes to them. The problem in Galatia was a Judaistic abuse of the Law. There was no need for Paul to tell them anything good about the Law – their problem was making too much of the Law. In Rome, however, there is no indication of rampant Jewish legalism. On the contrary, Paul addresses both Jews and Gentiles for Law-based arrogance. Some Jews were trusting the Law for their standing with God (2.12); some Gentiles were boasting that they had been grafted into God's people because the Jews stumbled over the Law (11.11, 17).

Dealing with both sides of the issue, Paul naturally points out the positive and negative aspects of the Law.

It should also be noted that, contrary to the opinions of commentators who wish to emphasize contradictions in Paul's thinking (Räsänen especially), the positive and negative attributes that Paul identifies are not mutually exclusive (Schreiner 21). To identify and write about a "contradiction," one must rely on at least a little overstatement of Paul's position.

B. ***What place does the Law have in a believer's life?***

Paul finds value in the Law. He quotes verses from the legal portions of the Pentateuch at least ten times without "disclaimers." Yet he never does so in a way that would constitute a literal application of that regulation to the believer's life. Instead, he argues his point based on what that law reveals about God's timeless character (e.g., Dt. 25.4; cf. I Cor. 9.9; I Tim. 5.18). The Law serves today as a paradigm: it teaches what holiness looked like for the Israelites in their cultural and historical context (Casillas 53-54). As such, it reveals principles and truths about God's character which modern believers can apply in their own life contexts.

The Mosaic Law no longer has a regulative role in the believer's life. Its function was specific to the time between Sinai and Christ (Gal. 3.24). Its works cannot justify anyone (Gal. 2.15-16; Rom. 9.31-32). Paul repeatedly tells Christians that they are not under law (Rom. 6.14; 8.2; Gal. 5.18). Instead, the Spirit reigns in the believer's life (Rom. 8.2-6; Gal. 5.18, 22-23). The entire Law is fulfilled by loving (Rom. 13.10; Gal. 5.14).

Incidentally, the actions of a Spirit-led, loving believer will look like obedience to the moral regulations of the Law, but the Spirit is the controlling factor, not the written Mosaic code.

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