

# Christians & the Old Testament Law – Part 2



*“So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.”*

*Galatians 3:9*

## Paul’s Response to the Galatian problem (“Christians have to keep the Testament Laws”)

### History repeats itself

When the problem arose in Galatia, this was not the first time this issue had arisen. It had *previously* been an issue in Antioch (in Syria) and Paul refers to this in his Galatian letter. It seems that sometime after his experience with Cornelius, Peter was visiting Antioch (from Jerusalem) and was happily eating with Gentile Christians. For some reason, when other visitors from Jerusalem arrived, he started eating *separately*. Precisely why he did this is not clear. Perhaps he was trying to avoid causing offence. Maybe it was fear. We know that Peter didn’t always think things through. But when Paul arrived, he realised what Peter was doing; he saw it as a major truth compromise, and he confronted him about it. Paul mentions this in chapter 2:11-21. There’s no evidence that Peter changed his mind and modified his behaviour at this stage. Paul does not say that he did so.

But now the same problem had arisen in Galatia. History was repeating itself, and this is why Paul wrote his letter. He was not happy. These were churches he had planted and worked hard for, and intruders from Jerusalem were spoiling the fruit of his ministry, undermining the gospel, leading the people astray and unsettling them. Paul, as their spiritual father, very reasonably felt protective of his converts and even more so of the truth of the gospel.

## Paul’s correction in chapter 3

### Verse 1

Paul is furious! *Foolish Galatians. What are you thinking about? Who has bewitched you? You’re not thinking straight!* This is straight-talking in which Paul makes it clear that this is no minor issue. There are, of course, matters over which Christians can legitimately hold different positions, but this is not one of them. He continues with two reasons.

### Verses 2–5

Reason one: Paul pointed out that the Galatians did not start out on their Christian life by keeping the law. They began with the gospel of Jesus Christ and putting their trust in Jesus as saviour. Furthermore, receiving the Holy Spirit, which was part of becoming a Christian, was not experienced because they kept the law. Neither was their ongoing experience of *the miraculous* in their Christian lives, because they kept the Old Testament rules. So, says Paul, if all these things happened without

law-keeping, why would they insist on the requirement of keeping the law now? It just did not make any sense. It was an unnecessary burden. Paul understands that things have changed. What applied to Jews who lived under the Law of Moses, does not apply to Gentiles who have trusted in Jesus.

### Verses 6–9

Reason two: Abraham (as their spiritual father) was put right with God by *believing* (Genesis 15:6). Abraham was not made right with God by keeping the Law of Moses. The Law of Moses came 430 years later. Abraham was justified by *faith*. The promise God made to Abraham was blessing to all nations which, of course, includes the Galatians. So likewise, they were put right with God by believing; that is *trusting*. Paul deals with this point more expansively in Romans. Those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. It was completely wrong for those Jewish Christians from Jerusalem to lay this additional burdensome requirement on Gentile believers. To do so undermined the gospel.

Unfortunately, in the subsequent history of the church, especially in the Middle Ages, people lost sight of this glorious truth. Indeed, the church devised its own laws ('good works') which were just as burdensome as those in the Old Testament. We owe it to Martin Luther for exposing this situation.

Martin Luther, who was looking at Galatians through the eyes of a Medieval monk, understood the issue very well. He completely understood the *faith* part. That was his major contribution and for that the Protestant Church should be profoundly grateful. His understanding of the *works of the law* was a little different however. Luther didn't see this through *Jewish* eyes. He talked about *good works*, which was not precisely what Paul was saying. Paul was talking about the Mosaic Law: a system of 600+ commandments. Luther was extending and applying that principle to his own time, and explaining that *any* attempt to earn righteousness by law-keeping was wrong. In that he was absolutely correct. Performing good works is not the way to be declared righteous, whether they are the Law of Moses (as per Paul), the laws of the Medieval Catholic church (as per Luther) or indeed any other system of law in any other religion (or indeed the law of conscience). None of these provide the means to be declared righteous by God. Righteousness comes by faith. We can all be righteous because we can all have faith. Being righteous by faith means that God sees us sharing the righteousness of Christ. This is the truth that blazes forth from Paul's letters to Galatia and Rome.

So, Paul's second point to the Galatians was that if their spiritual father, Abraham, was not made righteous by keeping laws that had not even been written at that time, then it was quite wrong to insist that they had to do so.

### Afterwards...

It was clear that to avoid this situation recurring, there had to be an authoritative ruling on the matter. It seems that shortly after Paul wrote this letter, he went to Jerusalem (Acts 15) where a Church Council, chaired by James (the brother of Jesus, who was regarded as the senior apostle), fully discussed the matter. No doubt there was a lot of conversation, a lot of listening and a lot of prayer. James summed up the conclusion of the gathering and ruled that *Gentiles did not have to keep the Jewish law to be Christian*. They were directed, however, to abstain from sexual immorality, meat with blood in it, and food dedicated to idols. These were important issues which were underlined to avoid further problems. Jesus had spoken emphatically about the importance of marriage, and immorality was endemic in the pagan world of the day. All major cities in the Roman

Empire had their own temples to a variety of gods, with blood sacrifices. The apostles set out a clear dividing line between this and appropriate Christian conduct. A circular letter from the Jerusalem Council was then taken to the Gentile churches, and the issue seems to have settled down after this time.

This does not mean that Christians can do whatever they like. We do not commit murder: neither do we steal. But we avoid these because they are incompatible with living a life with Jesus and His law of love, not because we are under the Old Testament rules as a system.

So, this leads to another question: how to decide which rules to keep and which to set aside, and it is to this that we will turn in the third and final part of our series.

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