

The Christian and the Law

Selected Scriptures

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For nearly six months I've been planning and promising a series of messages on the Ten Commandments. Today I want to introduce that subject by showing you some of the biblical and theological difficulties that surround the subject of Old Testament law. And let me begin by telling you that in my assessment, there is no more difficult problem for the New Testament theologian than the problem of understanding how the Old Testament law applies to the Christian.

And let's be perfectly honest: The law is fraught with dangers, if it is misapplied or misconstrued. The first heresy that ever attacked the church was the heresy of legalism. Certain men in the Jerusalem church wanted to apply the demands of the Old Testament law too rigorously, and they ended up trying to make the law's ceremonial requirements binding on all Gentiles as entrance requirements into the church. The apostle Paul regarded their teaching as a serious heresy and wrote strong words of condemnation against them.

Some of you will remember several years ago when we studied the major heresies, and we began that study with a

look at the Judaizers. And this morning, I want to review the error of the Judaizers for you, to show you why the ceremonial aspects of Moses' law are abrogated by the gospel.

This is an important preliminary, because for the next couple of months, as we look at the Ten Commandments, my emphasis will be on showing you why the *moral* aspects of the law are *not* abrogated by the gospel. And I think both emphases are equally important. So before we launch into a series designed to show you the importance of God's eternal, moral standards, I want to remind you that love for God's law does not entail legalism,, and I want to review for you why legalism—particularly the kind of legalism that attacked the early church—poses such a deadly danger for Christianity.

First I want to you to see *why* legalism presented such a stumbling-block to the early church. Then I want to examine the biblical account of how the controversy arose. Then I want to explain how Paul refuted this heresy. So we're just going to review this controversy from beginning to end like that. First, let's look at—

THE RATIONALE BEHIND LEGALISM

The relationship of Christianity to the law of Moses has always posed some very difficult problems. Let me briefly show you why:

Turn to the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5. This Sermon is Jesus' exposition on the moral content of the law. He's preaching to a Jewish audience here, and the Torah is his text. What he does in this sermon is highlight some of the main points of Moses' law and expound on what these commandments mean.

A lot of people misread the Sermon on the Mount and think Jesus is *modifying* the law. If you're not careful it is easy to get this impression, because the first part of the Sermon has this theme: Jesus says, "**Ye have heard that it was said . . .**"; "**But I say unto you.**" It almost sounds as if he is *changing* the meaning of the law—adding to, taking away from, and altering various principles of Old Testament law. That is *not* what Jesus is doing here, but it is easy to get the wrong impression if you're not attentive to what He is teaching.

For example, look at Matthew 5:38-39: "**Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.**"

Sounds like He is changing the law, right? The law *did* prescribe this eye-for-an-eye penalty. I'll read it to you from Leviticus 24:19-21:

If a man cause a blemish in his neighbour; as he hath done, so shall it be done to him; breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth: as he hath caused a blemish in a man,

so shall it be done to him again. And he that killeth a beast, he shall restore it: and he that killeth a man, he shall be put to death.

But here in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is giving a different principle: turn the other cheek. Doesn't that sound like He is modifying the law—doing away with the law's harsh penalty?

But that is a misreading of the passage. Jesus Himself began this very same section of the Sermon with these words (vv. 17-19):

17 Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.

18 For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.

19 Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

So he explicitly states that he is not nullifying or changing the law. Therefore that cannot be what is happening in verses 38-39.

Look those verses again: The eye-for-an-eye principle was a guideline in the Old Testament law was designed to *limit* the penalty that could be administered to someone who

broke the law. In many pagan nations, killing your neighbor's goat could be a capital crime. Some of my own ancestors were hanged as horse thieves.

But Moses *restricted* penalties according to the seriousness of a crime. These punishments were not doled out by individuals; they were supposed to be carefully imposed according to biblical principles of justice—one or two witnesses, and the authorities, not the aggrieved individual, administered the punishments. And the punishment had to fit the crime. That's where the eye-for-an-eye precept came in.

The rabbinical teachings had corrupted this principle. The scribes and Pharisees were using it to justify *personal* retaliations against others' wrongdoings. You insult me; I'm entitled to insult you in return. Your dog chews up my garden hose; I come with my lawn mower and chew up your garden hose.

Jesus said that's wrong. In matters of *personal* offense, the law of equivalent retribution does not apply. The principle of mercy and longsuffering applies—if you expect to be dealt with mercifully. **"For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again"** (Matthew 7:2).

What Jesus is teaching here does not *alter* the moral standard of the law; it unpacks the law so we can see the fuller moral scope of these commandments. The law says,

"Thou shalt not kill" (Matthew 5:21). Jesus says, "**But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment**" (v. 22).

The law says (v. 27), "**Thou shalt not commit adultery.**" Jesus says, "**whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.**" He is teaching us that there is a *deeper moral meaning* in the law than what is stated in the actual words. This is the difference between "the spirit of the law" and "the letter of the law."

So Jesus is not *modifying* the law, here. He is not adding to the divine moral standard. He is not moving the goal posts. He is simply explaining the true standard of righteousness that was *always* contained in the law. This is an eternal standard. It is a reflection of the character of God. Because God does not change, and because the moral standard He demands of us is based on His unchanging character, that moral standard does not change. It was in effect before Moses received the law at Sinai, and it remains binding on us today. It is now, and always has been, a sin to think immoral thoughts. God has always considered it a sin for one person to seek vengeance against another. These are not new principles Jesus is spelling out, nor can they ever be done away with.

And that is what Jesus means when he says not one jot or tittle shall pass from the law. He is clarifying, for the sake of

those who might misunderstand, that his disagreements with rabbinical teaching are not disagreements with the law itself.

But this presents a problem. Because He says not one jot or tittle of the law will pass away. Yet if we look at the law of Moses, we see a lot of regulations that were designed for Israel alone. They are not eternal moral principles. They are laws that govern the civic and religious life of the Israelite nation. The classic example is the law of circumcision, the sign of the Jewish covenant.

Starting with this command to be circumcised, and embracing all the laws governing the sacrifices, the priesthood, the Temple worship; the laws governing ceremonial defilement for the Jews; the dietary laws; and the laws governing Jewish holidays—all those laws are mingled into the law of Moses right alongside the moral principles.

Now, Colossians 2 clearly tells us that certain portions of the law no longer apply. Verse 14 says that Christ's death on the cross blotted out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us. Verses 16-17 say, "**Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.**" So right there in one fell swoop, Paul tells us that the dietary laws, the holiday laws, and all the ceremonial laws that foreshadowed Christ no longer apply to Christians.

Here, then, is the problem: How do we reconcile this with Jesus' statement that not one jot or tittle will pass away until *all* be fulfilled?

Hebrews 7:18 also says there is a setting aside, or a disannulment of the former law. And in context, it is clear that he is talking about the whole priestly system that was established under Moses' law. Again, how do we reconcile this with Jesus' sweeping affirmation of the whole law?

Theologians have tried to solve this problem various ways. Some of the old-line dispensationalists simply said that the whole Sermon on the Mount pertains to the kingdom age that is yet to come, and it is therefore irrelevant to the Christian era. I don't believe that for a moment. We don't have time to refute this view completely this morning, but if you think the Sermon on the Mount applies to some far-off dispensation rather than to us today, I urge you to read John MacArthur's commentary on Matthew, or his book, *Kingdom Living*. And as D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out, every commandment found in this Sermon is repeated for us elsewhere in the New Testament. So you gain nothing by pushing all of this off to the Millennium. Furthermore, supposing we did say that The Sermon on the Mount applies to the millennial age, it still poses a problem for Jesus' sweeping affirmation of the law. Are we supposed to believe that when he said not "**one jot or one tittle shall . . . pass from the law, till all be fulfilled**"—that He simply intended to put all

these principles on hold until he could establish His earthly kingdom? That view actually multiplies the problems with this passage.

Some theologians have addressed the difficulty by distinguishing between the moral law, the civil law, and the ceremonial law. The moral commandments would include the Ten commandments and any other regulations governing sexual purity and other plainly moral principles. The ceremonial laws are primarily the laws governing worship—or any other laws that were instituted for purely symbolic reasons, such as the law of circumcision. (Deuteronomy 30:6 and Jeremiah 4:4 indicate that circumcision symbolizes the renewal of the heart. That sort of symbolism is a mark of the ceremonial law.) And the civil law would obviously be those laws that governed the operation of justice and civil order in Jewish life, such as the laws about cities of refuge, laws governing treatment of slaves, and other judicial matters. (Exodus 21-22 is given mostly to these civil laws.)

I think this view is closer to the mark, but it is still not without difficulties. For example, some of the civil laws clearly contain moral principles, and some of the moral laws are mixed with ceremonial principles. There's a tremendous amount of disagreement over whether the Sabbath laws should be viewed primarily as ceremonial or moral laws.

Furthermore, you will not find this threefold division spelled out anywhere in Scripture. The Bible makes no neat distinctions between moral and ceremonial and civil law. Scripture does not even use those terms.

For that reason, other commentators say that the law of Moses is all one package; it stands or falls together. There is a modern movement known as *theonomy*, sometimes called *Christian Reconstruction*, which claims that the civil statutes of Moses' law should be just as binding on us today as the moral principles of the law. They believe the church has a mandate from God to reform government and society in order to institute the judicial principles of Moses' law and make them binding on all society.

Theonomists inevitably cite Matthew 5:18-19 in support of their views: "**Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.**"

So any way you look at the law, it seems, you're have difficulty explaining those words. Is the whole law binding on us today in the very same way it was for Israel, or is it not?

The Judaizers said yes. They claimed that in order to become a Christian, Gentile converts needed to be

circumcised and obey all the ceremonial and civil laws of Moses. This was a very compelling system for people who had grown up in Judaism, because they were conditioned from their infancy to view Gentile practices as unholy, unclean, and morally abhorrent.

You get a picture of the moral revulsion the Jews felt when you read about Peter's vision in Acts 10. Remember Peter was sitting on a rooftop, when he saw a sheet descend from heaven filled with unclean animals. Acts 10:12 says there were

all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean.

He was repulsed by this; it went against everything he was ever trained to do. But the Lord was about to teach Peter that the way of salvation was now open to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. This was the prelude to Conelius's conversion And Peter needed to see that a Gentile did not have to convert to Judaism before he could be saved.

Now let's look at the rise of legalism in the early church.

THE RISE OF LEGALISM

Turn to the book of Galatians. I'll warn you now that I'm going to ask you to turn back and forth between a couple of passages of Scripture. But I want you to see what the issues were.

The Galatian church was probably founded by Paul on one of his early missionary journeys. Clearly these were people he knew and had invested his life in. you can sense his passion for them by what he writes.

Someone evidently had come to this church teaching that circumcision was necessary for salvation, and the church was buying into that view. After his customary greeting to open this epistle, Paul launches into the matter immediately in verse 6 of chapter 1:

I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel:

7 Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ.

8 But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.

9 As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.

So he renounces the Judaizers' message in the strongest possible terms. Paul never uses language stronger than this anywhere in Scripture.

Next he spends some time defending his apostolic credentials, starting in verse 11:

But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man.

12 For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ.

And in verses 13-14, he underscores his own commitment to the Jewish religion. He reminds them that he was a Hebrew of the Hebrews and a Pharisee of the Pharisees. And at one time, he was the most feared persecutor of the church—precisely because he was so zealous for Judaism. So not only did he have apostolic authority, but his status as a Jew was beyond question.

Paul then recounts his experience immediately after his conversion on the road to Damascus. Verse 17 says the first thing he did was spend some time in the Arabian desert, in private communion with God. It is there that he received the truth of the gospel directly from Christ. This was an important issue to Paul. It was the strongest possible proof of his apostleship that he had personally seen a miraculous vision of the risen Lord, and he says the most important training for His subsequent ministry happened during this supernatural communion with Christ.

To Paul, and to the other apostles, the fact that he had seen Christ and received the gospel directly from Him was proof that Christ had commissioned Paul to an apostolic role. This is the reason the other apostles recognized Paul's apostleship. Had anyone else claimed apostolic authority, the Apostles would no doubt have rejected them, but Paul's superior knowledge of the gospel, which he could not have received from any man, was proof of his apostleship.

Acts 9:26 describes Paul's first trip to visit the church at Jerusalem (don't turn there). At first the Christians there were afraid of him. Barnabas took him and introduced him to "the disciples"—and this clearly means he met with the people of the church, not with the apostles, because here in Galatians 1:18-19 he says, **"Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days. *But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord's brother.*"**

So Paul stayed only two weeks in Jerusalem, and the only apostle he met with was Peter. Then he began an extended ministry in a region where no gospel witness had ever been (verse 21)—in the regions of Syria and Cilicia (sih-LIS-ee-uh). Syria and Cilicia are directly north of Israel, north of what is Lebanon today, in the very southern part of Asia Minor, right where the land mass turns west. The chief city of Cilicia is Tarsus, Paul's home town. So the first thing Paul did as a new Christian was go back home with the gospel. He stayed there for fourteen years.

Evidently, word began to get back to the churches around Jerusalem that Paul was preaching Christianity to the Gentiles in these remote areas. He says (v. 22) that he was **"unknown by face unto the churches of Judaea which were in Christ: but they had heard only, That he which persecuted us in times past now preacheth the faith which once he destroyed. And they glorified God in me."**

That's when Paul's reputation began to grow. At one time he had been the most feared man in the whole Roman Empire, as far as the church was concerned. Now word began to get around that he was taking the gospel to areas beyond Israel, and the churches in and around Jerusalem were amazed.

Notice that Barnabas Paul's partner in ministry. Barnabas was a leader in the Jerusalem church. Remember he was the one who took Paul to meet with the church when they were all afraid of him. After Paul's first trip to Jerusalem, Barnabas had evidently joined him in Syria and Cilicia.

Now look at Galatians 2. Starting in verse 1, Paul begins telling of another trip to Jerusalem, fourteen years later:

"Then fourteen years after I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and took Titus with me also."

This might refer to Paul's second trip to Jerusalem. In Acts 11:30, we read that Paul and Barnabas visited Jerusalem in order to deliver money to care for the Jerusalem saints during a famine there. This famine had been predicted by the

prophet Agabus, and perhaps that is what Paul means when he says in verse 2 that he "**went up by revelation.**"

But the timing and the circumstances of this visit actually seem to fit better if we understand this Galatians 2 passage to be a description of Paul's visit to Jerusalem during the Church Council described in Acts 15. Turn there for just a moment. We will return to Galatians 2, so make a bookmark or something and keep it there, because here's where we will go back and forth a couple of times.

Here's the historical background of what led to the first-ever church council:

The setting is Antioch. Paul and Barnabas are there. And we read this in Acts 15:1:

certain men which came down from Judaea [in other words they were from the area of Jerusalem, and possibly even from the Jerusalem church. These men] taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.

2 When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.

The Jerusalem church decided to have a council meeting expressly to deal with the doctrinal issues raised by the teaching of these Judaizers. There was obviously a difference

of opinion in the Jerusalem church about the propriety of the Judaizers' doctrine. Many in Jerusalem were evidently in agreement with the Judaizers. So the apostles wisely invited Paul and Barnabas so they could consider all sides of the issue.

Now put your bookmark here for a minute and go back to Galatians 2. Here Paul tells us that when he got to Jerusalem, before he met with the church as a whole, he met privately with the Apostles and leadership of the Jerusalem church—in order to explain to them the message he was preaching to the Gentiles. He writes,

2 And I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain.

Now what does he mean that he was fearful that he had run in vain? Some have suggested that Paul was eager to hear confirmation from the other apostles that the message he was preaching had not been a false one.

But that cannot be the case. Paul was certain of his message, and he underscores this again and again throughout his writings. He was absolutely certain of the gospel, because he had received it personally from the Lord.

His fear of "**running in vain**" suggests that he was concerned lest this doctrine of the Judaizers split the young church and destroy what Paul had labored for among the

Gentiles. He saw the dangers of this doctrine, and he was eager to convince the leadership of the Jerusalem church. So he first met privately with them.

Back to Acts 15. Verse 4 says this: "**when [Paul and Barnabas] were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them.**" This is still prior to the convening of the actual council.

Verse 5 suggests that the controversy broke out immediately: "**But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.**" Notice that the leaders of the Judaizers were "converted" Pharisees. Paul would not have been the least bit intimidated by this, because he had once been a Pharisee himself.

Now we simply don't have enough time to examine this whole passage in depth, but look at what transpires here: "**The apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter**" (v. 6). There was much disputing (v. 7), and then Peter rose up and recounted what had occurred at the conversion of Cornelius (vv. 7-10). And Peter very clearly takes Paul's side (vv. 10-11): "**Why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.**"

Notice that Peter homes in on the crucial issue: salvation by the grace of God. This is what was at stake.

Next, (v. 12), Paul and Barnabas took the floor, "**declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them.**"

Then James stood up and summarized the discussion and gave a biblical basis for the conversion of the Gentiles (vv. 14-19). Finally he delivers the Council's decision (v. 19):

Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God:

20 But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.

Notice that they asked the Gentiles in the young church to abstain from four kinds of ceremonial defilement: "**pollutions of idols . . . fornication . . . things strangled, and . . . blood.**"

Now we know from Paul's words in Romans 14:14 that in terms of food, "**there is nothing unclean of itself.**" So these dietary restrictions are not binding commandments.

Understand what the council is asking by raising these four issues: they were not binding the Gentiles with the law. They were only requesting that the Gentiles in the infant church, as a matter of deference to their Jewish brethren, abstain from the very worst kinds of ceremonial defilement. These were not to be permanently binding laws on the church for all time. With one exception, they were not

obligatory regulations, but voluntary ones, so that the Gentiles minimized offence to the Jews. This is the very same principle Paul affirmed in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 10 about not offending the weaker brother.

But why is fornication listed here? After all, the prohibition against fornication is a moral, not a ceremonial, principle. This prohibition against fornication would be binding on the Gentiles as a matter of moral necessity, wouldn't it?

Yes it would, but here's why they emphasized it here: In the world of the first century, Gentile religions were shot through with immoral worship practices. Fornication was a religious rite in many of the Roman religions. If you've ever visited Corinth, for example, you can still see huge brothels where temple prostitutes plied their trade as a religious ritual. Fornication was so deeply ingrained in Gentile worship, that the council included it in the list of things they expressly were asking the gentiles to avoid. What this shows is how abhorrent to the Jews was the idea of eating blood. They actually categorized it with ceremonial fornication.

But don't get so caught up in these exceptions that you miss the importance the council's decision. This was a conscious, deliberate, summary rejection of the doctrine of the Judaizers. The Gentiles were not required to be circumcised, and the ritual requirements of the law as a whole were not to be required of any Christian.

This was a monumental affirmation of Paul and his ministry among the Gentiles. It was also a sweeping endorsement of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This council decision preserved the gospel from the judaizers.

Now return to Galatians 2 and we will finish up there. We have examined the biblical *rationale* given by legalists; we have observed the *rise* of legalists in the early church. Now let's examine the *rebuttal* of the legalists given by the apostle Paul to the church at Galatia.

THE REBUTTAL OF LEGALISM

In Galatians 2:3-10, Paul describes what seems to be winding down of the Jerusalem council. He had brought Titus, uncircumcised, along with him, evidently as a test case. He notes that Titus was not compelled to be circumcised. The leaders in the Jerusalem church specifically declined to make this an issue.

Verse 9 tells us that the Jerusalem Church then formally commissioned Paul and Barnabas as apostles to the Gentiles, and Peter, James, and the others in the Jerusalem Church agreed to continue their work among the Jews. The Judaizer conflict should have settled.

But the danger still lurked. Think this through: Peter and James continued ministering in the Jerusalem Church, which would have been overwhelmingly, if not completely, Jewish.

They would have had little or no contact with Gentile Christians. They no doubt continued eating Kosher food (nothing wrong with that) and the Jerusalem church would have retained a strongly Jewish flavor. They may have forgotten about the threat the Judaizers posed. But it appears that the Judaizers continued worshiping unhindered with the Jerusalem Christians.

This is how heresy often works. When you think it has been defeated in the open, it moves underground and begins working secretly. That's what it seems the Judaizers did.

Paul describes an incredible event that evidently took place sometime after the Jerusalem Council. Verse 11 says Paul and Peter were in Antioch at the same time. Antioch would have been a predominantly Gentile church. Peter came to visit there and ate with the Gentiles, behaving pretty much as Paul would have behaved, becoming all things to all men for the sake of the gospel—"to them that are without law, as without law."

But then some emissaries from James came. These may have been the Judaizers, or friends of the Judaizers, from the Jerusalem church. Suddenly, Peter's behavior changed dramatically. Paul relates what happened (v. 12):

12 For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision [the Judaizers].

13 And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation.

Evidently Peter was afraid that news would get back to the Judaizers in Jerusalem that he was eating Gentile food. And suddenly Peter, all the other Jewish believers, and even Paul's own companion, Barnabas, began to withdraw from the Jewish believers.

Paul saw what was happening, and verse 11 says he **"withstood [Peter] to the face, because he was to be blamed."** Paul saw what neither Peter, nor Barnabas, nor any of the other Jewish believers could see: that this hypocrisy about observing the Old Covenant ceremonies was actually clouding the truth of the gospel: (v. 14) **"They walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel."**

Because *the truth of the gospel* was what was at stake, Paul made his rebuke a public one. He says (v. 14): **"I said unto Peter before them all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?"**

The issue was justification by faith. Notice verse 16: **"Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified."**

Listen: This was the whole issue with Paul against the Judaizers' brand of legalism: it nullified the doctrine of justification by faith. If a person had to be circumcised in order to become a Christian, then that ritual work was a prerequisite for justification, and justification would not be by faith *alone*.

In Romans 4, Paul points out that even Abraham was justified *before* he was circumcised. Circumcision therefore cannot be a requirement for salvation.

Moreover, all the ceremonial aspects of the law are fulfilled in Christ. To make these commandments binding on Christians is to nullify Christ altogether.

In John 5:46. Jesus says, "**Moses . . . wrote of me.**" Many elements of Moses' law prefigured Christ. These laws foreshadowed Christ. They are like prophetic pictures of Him. And now that we have Christ who is the substance, those symbolic ordinances are fulfilled. Colossians 2:17 says those laws "**are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.**" Since we have the substance, we do not need to retreat to the shadows. The Judaizers were trying to go back to the shadows. They were wanting to place New Covenant believers under Old Covenant requirements.

Understand this: these laws about circumcision and animal sacrifices and all the other ceremonial aspects of the law were not nullified; they were fulfilled. They don't pass

away; but rather in Christ we enter into the fullest possible meaning of them.

Those aspects of the law fulfilled in Christ have not been abrogated; they have been realized in Christ. There is a significant difference.

The fact that we are no longer under the obligation to offer daily sacrifices does not suggest that these laws simply passed into oblivion. They were not annulled. Rather, what they demanded was forever satisfied—once-for-all fulfilled in Christ. This is perfectly in harmony with Jesus' promise that not one jot or tittle of the law would pass away until all is fulfilled. According to Romans 10:4, Christ is the end, or the goal, of the law for righteousness for everyone who believes.

In other words, He imputes to us the full merit of His own perfect obedience to the law. He has fulfilled it all on our behalf.

So is the moral aspect of Moses' law still binding? Absolutely. The law's moral demands flow from the character of God Himself. They cannot change, or diminish, or be nullified. They, too, have been perfectly fulfilled on our behalf by Christ. We receive the merit of His obedience. But the laws remain in force as standards of holy behavior. Fornication, and stealing, and idolatry are just as forbidden for the Christian in Christ as they were for the Jew under Moses' law.

Paul says we are not under the law but under grace. That means we are not subject to the penalty of the law. We cannot be condemned by the law. We are not obligated to continue carrying out the ceremonial aspects of the law. We are now under grace, liberated to fulfill the law's moral demands. But those *moral* demands have not been abrogated.

This touches the very heart of the gospel. All that the law demands for our justification has been fulfilled perfectly in Christ. There are no ceremonies or rituals left for us to do before we can be justified in God's sight. Christ has already done it all on our behalf.

We don't have to perform any religious ceremonies or legal obedience as a prerequisite to our justification. None of the works of the law can earn us any merit in God's eyes. All the merit that is necessary has been acquired for us by Christ. It is freely imputed to all who believe. As Roman 4:5-6 says, **"To him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. . . . God imputeth righteousness without works."**

That's the gospel in a single statement. That's what the legalism of the judaizers obscured. And that's why the apostle Paul was prepared to fight this heresy with every ounce of energy he had.