

‘Against Such Things There Is No Law’

In a previous article,¹ I made some comments on a recent (September 2017) Facebook post which included the following:

No Law! ‘But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law’. Galatians 5:22-23 ESV. This verse is indisputable. It cannot be implied that Paul only intends to say that the law of Moses alone is not in play – he plainly says ‘NO LAW OF ANY KIND’.

I agree wholeheartedly. The correspondent has got it precisely right. There is no law whatsoever that can or will condemn a life displaying the fruit of the Spirit. Excellent! If only he had left it there. Alas, he did not. He moved on:

‘NO LAW OF ANY KIND’. And this indicates that when he [that is, Paul] says, so many times, elsewhere,² that the believer is not ‘under law’, he also means ‘not under any law’.

Hmm! I make two initial comments.

First, we are presented with a gloss. Let us be clear about this. We have been given a gloss. Linking the apostle’s statement at the end of verse 23 with other verses, the correspondent has turned ‘against such things there is no law’ into ‘the believer is under no law at all’. He has put words in the apostle’s mouth. The apostle could have said what the correspondent wanted him to say, but the plain fact is he did not. Why not? Even so, of course, this gloss would be perfectly fair if the context shows that this is what the apostle meant.

Consequently, *secondly*, we must probe the context to see if this is indeed what the apostle was saying.

¹ ‘Stop Press! No Law For Believers! Really?’.

² Many times? How many? Three? Rom. 6:14-15; Gal. 5:18. Are there any more? But, I agree, the apostle did talk of ‘under law’. See below.

Before we do, let us remind ourselves that we are dealing with a massive issue. This must be recognised. It is not a question of semantics. If it is true that the believer is under no law at all, very serious consequences follow. Very serious consequences, indeed! So much so, we would be wise to insist on the surest exegesis to make certain that we had good ground before running with the idea that the believer is free of all law, that the believer is lawless.

The apostle was writing to the Galatians to rescue them from law men, men who wanted them under the Mosaic law. He was grieved that they had been listening to these teachers, and buying into their dogma. And he used the strongest, most passionate language to plead with them not to leave Christ.³ Pulling out all the stops, he drew on every argument he could think of to refute the doctrine of the law men, and maintain the liberty the believer has in Christ in the new covenant. I will not argue these points here, having done so in several works.⁴ But this is the general context of the letter. And Galatians 5:23 sits securely within that context. That background must never be forgotten when looking at individual passages, individual clauses (as in this case) or phrases within the book.

Putting it negatively, there is not remotest hint that Paul wrote to the Galatians to tell them they were free of all law; in particular, that they were not under the law of Christ. The law men were not urging the Galatians to come under the law of Christ! That much is certain. It was the law of Moses that Paul and the law men were concerned with from start to finish. And that is why the apostle wrote to the believers to urge them not to listen to the law men. He wrote to convince them of the scriptural liberty that they, as saints, had in Christ.

The fact is, Paul used the word ‘law’ many times throughout Galatians, and on every occasion, possibly apart from three, he meant the law of Moses. Two of the exceptions are: ‘For if there

³ Compare the letter to the Hebrews.

⁴ See my *Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law; Sanctification in Galatians; Three Verses Misunderstood*; ‘Three Verses Misunderstood’; and so on. See also various audios and videos.

had been a law [legal system] given' (Gal. 3:21), and 'against such there is no law [principle or legal system]' (Gal. 5:23); and in both the closest analogy is the law of Moses.⁵ The third and main exception is: 'The law of Christ' (Gal. 6:2).

Again, it must be remembered that when Paul is talking about the law of Moses and uses 'law' without the definite article – 'law' instead of 'the law' – the absence of the article actually strengthens his point. I am not whistling in the dark. I have fully argued the case elsewhere.⁶

All this must be borne in mind when coming to Galatians 5:23.

As for the immediate context of Galatians 5:23, let me start at verse 16. Remember, there is no chapter division:

Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another. Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ (Gal. 5:16 – 6:2).

Patently, Paul is addressing the subject of the believer's progressive sanctification. That is his concern here. How will the believer live a progressively sanctified life? How can he live a

⁵ For Gal. 5:23, see below.

⁶ See my *Christ*.

life of godliness, of holiness, of Christ-likeness? By coming under the law of Moses (whittled down to the so-called moral law'), *à la* Calvin – as so many teach today? Paul could not be clearer. The believer will live, the believer can only live, a life of progressive sanctification by the Spirit. The law of Moses? Going under the law of Moses hinders progressive sanctification! As the apostle told the Romans, it is only because the believer has died to the law of Moses that he can possibly live a life of progressive sanctification (Rom. 7:4-6). He virtually says the same here in Galatians:

If [since] you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law (Gal. 5:18).

And he clearly means the law of Moses, as I have argued from the context.

Consequently, the apostle presses his readers to live, not as under the law of Moses, but to live – to walk – in the Spirit:

Walk by the Spirit... If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit (Gal. 5:16,25).

And he has wonderful news for the Galatians! Paul offers them the most tremendous encouragement – all based on the glorious provisions of the new covenant. As he well knows, every believer has the Spirit (John 14:17; Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; 1 John 4:2), and the Spirit has given every believer a new heart to live a life of obedience to all God's commands (Jer. 31:31; Ezek. 36:25-27). Nevertheless, as Paul, leaving no room for doubt, makes as clear as noonday, the believer has the responsibility, the duty, to walk in the Spirit; that is, he is duty-bound to live out that life of obedience to God's commands by the Spirit. Note the apostolic imperative: 'Walk!' This is a command!

But Paul then spells out the fruit which the Spirit will produce in the believer's life in this way of obedience:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

What a glorious encouragement to every believer! This is what the Spirit will produce in the child of God. The law of Moses cannot do it. But the Spirit of God can, does and will produce it!

This is what the apostle is saying in the context, both of the passage and the entire book.

Sadly, as we all have to confess, the believer's progressive sanctification is never complete in this life. Positionally, his sanctification is perfect the moment he trusts Christ and is thus united to him. But progressively... alas, no. No believer is perfect in this life.⁷

Even so, the believer can still be assured. Indeed he can! The Spirit is producing his fruit in the believer's life. What is more... the apostle then comes to his punch line. Although the believer, looking at his life, has to confess the inadequacy of his attainment – indeed, the more spiritual he is, the more he sees how weak his progressive sanctification is – nevertheless, he must never forget a glorious truth. Which is? However weak his progressive sanctification – and the apostle is not condoning any inadequacy in himself or others – the believer can rest assured that there is no possibility of condemnation for him. No! As he told the Romans:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:1-4).

But see how Paul puts it here: 'Against such things there is no law'; that is, there is no law whatsoever – whether the law of Moses or the law of Christ, or indeed, any law of man (unless that man is utterly perverted) (Prov. 16:7; 1 Pet. 3:13) – that will condemn him.

It is essential to remember that there is a fundamental chasm between the unspiritual man, the man in the flesh, and the man in the Spirit (Rom. 7:4-6; 8:1-17; 1 Cor. 2:14-16), and it shows in the life-style of each, and in their everlasting end:

The works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of

⁷ See my *Fivefold Sanctification; Positional Sanctification*.

anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (Gal. 5:19-24).

Therefore says the apostle:

If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit (Gal. 5:25).

And the clause we are looking at lies right at the heart of that extract. When talking about the fruit of the Spirit, the apostle is categorical: ‘Against such things there is no law’. Every believer has the Spirit. The Spirit is producing fruit in every believer. And, as a consequence, the apostle can assure every single believer that no law will condemn him – none whatsoever because, as Paul so boldly asserts: ‘Against such things there is no law’.

This is what the apostle is saying. The notion that he is telling believers that they are free of all law, or even implying it, is wholly foreign to the context. More. It contradicts the entire ambience of the context, which is replete with stressing the believer’s responsibility to walk in the Spirit, keep in step with the Spirit, to live a life in the Spirit, producing fruit in the Spirit, obeying God’s law (for the believer, this can only be the law of Christ) in the Spirit. As Ezekiel 36:25-27 promises, the believer will, by the Spirit, obey God’s commands. God’s commands? We know, as Paul has stated so clearly, that the believer is no longer under the law of Moses. There is only one law he can be under, therefore, only one person’s commands he must obey. The Spirit moves him to do it, and he has to do it. Do what? Surely to walk in the Spirit under the law of Christ.

But all this, in a sense, is taking us away from the thrust of the clause we are looking at. Which is precisely what the Facebook correspondent did. He started with an idea – that the believer is free of all law – and he foisted it upon this clause. And then he, like a conjuror producing a rabbit out of a hat, gave us his

deduction! The apostle's 'against such [that is, the fruit of the Spirit] there is no law' has been stretched way beyond breaking point to become 'believers are under no law'.

And what an assertion! The believer is under no law! How far reaching! As I have said, we should demand a far better foundation for such a staggering claim, a claim fraught with such serious – not to say, dire – consequences. After all, being law-less can so easily morph into being lawless. History warns us that it has happened before.

Finally, I can only say that I have consulted a string of commentators on the clause, not one of whom got remotely near suggesting that the believer is under no law whatsoever.

I close with a few extracts.

C.H.Spurgeon:

Against such there is no law. Neither God nor man has ever made a law against these things [the fruit of the Spirit] – the more there is of them, the better will it be for everybody. Oh, that they prevailed all over the world!⁸

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. Neither human nor divine! Good men make no law against these things, nor does God, for he approves of them.⁹

And John Brown:

Some have supposed that the apostle's meaning may be thus expressed: 'If all men were of this description, there would be no need of law'. [But] these are not at all the class of people against whom 'law' is directed. We rather think that the following statement comes at least nearer his object in introducing this clause: The Judaising teachers, to gain their end, not only talked much of the advantages of submitting to the law of Moses, but also of the danger of not submitting to it. Now, says the apostle, 'these threatenings need not alarm you if you thus walk in the Spirit. That law [that is, the law of Moses] approves of such

⁸ Exposition following sermon 2632.

⁹ Exposition following sermon 2831.

characters and corresponding conduct; that law [that is, the law of Moses] has no curse for you'.¹⁰

As I have explained, I would take it further. No law whatsoever will ever condemn the believer. That is all Paul was saying in the clause. But that was more than enough!

¹⁰ John Brown: *An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians*, Robert Carter and Brothers, New York, 1853, pp307-308.