

The Law is Not of Faith

Following the standard interpretations of Leviticus 18:5, Romans 10:5, and Galatians 3:11-12, one may inevitably conclude two things. First, God's covenant with Israel through Moses is, in some sense, a republication of the Covenant of Works. Second, and as a result, God continues to offer eternal life through obedience. The theology of the first glance confirms that these points are undoubted truth.

However, my own study of Old Testament texts quoted in the New Testament, sustains this working principle: Jesus and the Apostles, always quote from the Old Testament Scripture by utilizing the meanings of their respective quotations within their original Old Testament contexts. They faithfully do so except when they plainly indicate they are interpreting Old Testament texts contrary to their Old Testament meanings. Romans 10:5 and Galatians 3:11-12 refer to and quote Leviticus 18:5 out of context, giving it a meaning opposite to that found in its original context. The following study seeks to resolve this dilemma.

The Covenant of Works is a special act of God's providence (WSC 12). God's command was singular and simple. "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:16-17). By giving this command, God placed Adam and Eve on probation. If they kept God's command, they would receive what we know as eternal life in heaven. Failure on their part would result in banishment from the garden, forfeiture of life, and the curse of death.

Exodus 20:1-2 gives us the preface to the Ten Commandments. "And God spoke all these words, saying, 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.'" What does the preface to the Ten Commandments teach us? "The preface to the Ten Commandments teaches us, that because God is the Lord, and our God, and Redeemer, therefore we are bound to keep all his commandments" (WSC 44). In other words, the Ten Commandments were given to a people already redeemed from bondage. Therefore, this Moral Law is not a restatement of the Covenant of Works.

However, Leviticus 18:5 appears to contradict this statement regarding the Moral Law, "If a person does them, he shall live by them." Two important points must be made. First, the context of Leviticus 18:5 agrees with that of Exodus 20.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the Lord your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the Lord your God. You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the Lord (Lev. 18:1-5).

The people of God are at the foot of Mount Sinai. They have already received the tablets of stone bearing the Ten Commandments. The Lord is now explaining the implications and applying these Ten Words to the people. Verse 1 reminds the people of the scene at Sinai upon the giving of the Law, "I am the Lord your God" (Exod. 20:2). The Lord warns the people not to live like the Egyptians from whom they were delivered. "You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt" (verse 3). The Lord also warns Israel not to live like the people in the land of Canaan. "You shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan" (verse 3). God's instructions are clear, "You shall follow my rules" (verse 4). God's Law was a rule of life. It was not given as a Covenant of Works.

Second, verse 5 appears to run contrary to the context. "If a person does them, he shall live by them." Verse 5 does not offer a promise of life on the basis of obedience. How so? The ESV, along with several other versions, translates the second clause in the statement, "He shall live by them." In English, in the third person, the use of "shall" rather than "will" indicates that an assertion or a command is being made not a promise or forecast regarding the future. This second clause may be read, "He lives by them." If we translated the first clause with "When," as it may be, the complete sentence reads, "When a person does them, he lives by them." The main clause defines the subordinate clause. Understood in this way, verse 5 is in harmony with the immediate context, the Moral Law given as a rule for life. Leviticus 18:5 does not offer a promise of life through obedience. It is not a restatement of the Covenant of Works.

Paul quotes Leviticus 18:5 in Romans 10:5 and Galatians 3:11-12. In both of these texts, it appears that Paul uses Leviticus 18:5 in a way that is contrary to its original context. It seems as though he uses Leviticus 18:5 to contrast legal righteousness with righteousness based on faith. This apparent conflict with the Old Testament raises two questions. First, would the apostle quote a text from the Old Testament without being faithful to its original meaning and original context? Our automatic answer is, "No!" In the prominent case in which Paul does interpret the Old Testament out of accord with its original intent, he tells us he is doing so. Paul interprets the Genesis narratives about Abraham, Sarah Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac allegorically, and he indicates that this is his tact. Both Romans 10:5 and Galatians 3:11-12 make no such declaration. Paul quotes Leviticus 18:5 in a straightforward fashion. Therefore, we expect him to use this text as understood in its original context.

The English versions contrast Romans 10:5 and 10:6-9,

For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. **But** the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved (emphasis added).

The solution is actually quite simple. The Greek particle translated "But" may be translated "And." Verse 10 is an example of this construction. "**For** with the heart one believes and is justified, **and** with the mouth one confesses and is saved" (emphasis added). Remember too, that "shall" in the third person, "shall live by them," is an affirmation or declaration rather than a forecast of the future. Therefore, we may read Romans 10:5-6 as follows, "For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments lives by them. And the righteousness based on faith says . . ."

Paul's argument is with those who seek their own righteousness (Rom. 10:3). They are wrong on two counts. First, Leviticus 18:5 shows us the Law is our way of life; it is not a way to life via obedience. Second, the way to life and righteousness is faith in the Christ, to whom the Law points and leads (Rom. 10:4).

The interpretation of Galatians 3:11-12, "Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for 'The righteous shall live by faith.' But the law is not of faith, rather 'The one who does them shall live by them,'" revolves around the meaning of the prepositional phrase, "of faith," or "by faith" as it is often translated. Paul uses the same phrase in several

verses preceding verses 11-12.

Verse 7, "Know then that it is those of faith [ek pisteōs] who are the sons of Abraham." That is, they believe the promise of God in Christ and are justified by grace through faith. Faith is the active means of justification.

Verse 8, "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith [ek pisteōs], preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." Faith is the alone means of justification.

Verse 9, "So then, those who are of faith [ek pisteōs] are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith." Again, faith is the alone means of justification.

Verse 11, "Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for 'The righteous shall live by faith [ek pisteōs].'" Here is the classic statement of justification by grace through faith. Compare Romans 1:17.

Verse 12, in the English Standard Version, goes on to say, "But the law is not of faith [ek pisteōs]," that is, the Law is not a means of justification. Paul continues with the little word "But," which also may be translated "And." There is no contradiction between the fact that justification is by grace through faith and the fact that the Law is not a means of justification. The text continues with a strong adversative [alla], translated "rather."

Taking all of this understanding together, we may translate or interpret Galatians 3:11-12 as follows, "Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for 'The righteous shall live by faith.' And the law is not of faith [the Law is not a means of justification], rather 'The one who does them lives by them.'" Simply put, the Law is not a means of justification but rather a rule by which to live.

Properly understood, in his use of Leviticus 18:5 in Romans 10:5 and Galatians 3:11-12, the Apostle Paul neither affirms that obedience to the Law obtains eternal life, nor that the Ten Commandments, along with their associated explanations and applications, constitute a republication of the Covenant of Works. Your comments and interaction is welcome.

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