

Romans 3:19-31 Faith and Law

This is one of those passages we have to wrestle with, and ultimately allow God to win!

Romans 3:19 – if the law (the teaching and instruction of the OT Scriptures) revealed that even God’s chosen, the Jews, were sinners, then most certainly everyone else are also sinners, and the whole world is held accountable to Him.

Romans 3:20 – no-one can merit salvation, or earn forgiveness, by any kind of human effort, religious or otherwise. No-one can present themselves to God on that Day and say, “You must accept me, look at what a good person I’ve been!” Instead, when we read the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit is doing His convicting work in our lives, we become conscious of sin. The Law in itself doesn’t have the power to save, and it never has. The only One who has the power to save is the Lord Himself.

Romans 3:21-24 – the words *all have sinned* are not God’s last words to humanity. His last word is this: *all are freely justified by His grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ*. It’s not about what we have done for God, but about what he has done for us.

Romans 3:25-26 – Jesus atoned for our sins by shedding his blood on the cross. Through faith in Jesus we are forgiven and made right with God.

Romans 3:27-28 – boasting is excluded because a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. He is our Saviour.

Romans 3:29-31 – Paul asks a question, which from our perspective we may not expect, but it’s a question which gets to the heart of the book of Romans: *Is God the God of the Jews only?* Justification is by faith in Jesus (lit. *The faithfulness of Jesus*) for the Jew, and also for the gentile. In saying this Paul upholds the law.

The law is one area of Christian theology which is likely to bring confusion to most Christians! The Exodus event is a powerful illustration to help us understand faith and law. God’s people were slaves in Egypt under cruel bondage. They were powerless to save themselves. But God by His grace and mighty power saved His people and brought them into a Promised Land to worship him, to establish them as a nation and to be a light to the gentile nations.

I believe there are some common misconceptions about the law (properly called Torah):

- 1. The law and therefore Judaism was/is legalistic:** but the law was only given after God had saved his people from slavery (by grace). The law was then given, at Sinai, as an expression of His will. It was never intended as a means of earning salvation.
- 2. The law was/is bondage and a curse:** God didn’t save His people out of bondage in Egypt only to bring them into another (and worse?) bondage called the law. What kind of God would do that?
- 3. The law was/is impossible to keep:** But God said, *Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach.* [Deuteronomy 30:11] Sinless perfection was never part of the deal, which is why the sacrificial system was introduced. But God was looking for a people who would love Him with all their hearts and follow His commands (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). There were blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience, but this doesn’t mean that the law itself was a curse ... though of course the law was impossible to keep apart from covenant faith.

The Exodus event illustrates what God has done in Jesus, a second Exodus, to lead us out of the bondage of sin. There is a power behind sin from which we have to be delivered (e.g. occult, lust hate speech etc.) Only God in Christ can save us from our sins. But once we are saved, we seek to live our lives by God's teaching and instruction revealed in the Scriptures. (NB the first Christians didn't have a New Testament.)

So being justified by faith doesn't nullify the law. But there were clearly some in Paul's day who thought that Paul was nullifying the law. In Acts 21 Paul arrived in Jerusalem, to be soon informed that there were many believing Jews who thought Paul was teaching against the law of Moses. The church leaders suggested that Paul join in Jewish purification rites to prove there was no truth in the assertion that Paul, as a Jew, was teaching against the Law of Moses, and indeed that Paul himself was *living in obedience to the law* (Acts 21:22-24).

This passage creates theological anguish for Christian interpreters (most) who think that Paul delivered Christianity from the law. The usual interpretation is that Paul's actions were an evangelistic strategy: Paul was being all things to all men (1Corinthians 9:20). However there are great problems with this, not least, that teaching one thing and doing another is hypocrisy and deceit. Rather, I believe it is far better to remove the blinkers over our eyes and read the text as it stands: that Paul didn't see any contradiction between faith in Jesus and observing the law (compare with Romans 2:13).

John Stott outlined three helpful Christian attitudes to the law:

1. **The legalist** – the person who thinks rule keeping or merit can earn salvation.
2. **The libertine (or antinomian)** – the person who thinks the law is the source of man's moral and spiritual problems (the opposite extreme of the legalist).
3. **The law-abiding believer** – who realises that the law can't justify anyone, but recognises the law as an expression of God's will, and by his Spirit we can obey his commandments.

Nevertheless most commentators (including Stott) assume Paul was referring only to moral aspects of the law. So Romans 3:31 is understood to mean, *Do we then nullify the moral law by this faith? Not at all!* The idea here is that the law can be divided into ceremonial, ritual and moral parts. The problem is that the Bible itself doesn't do this, and different kinds of verses are all mixed up, even in the same chapters. There is no indication in this passage that Paul means anything other than the whole teaching of Moses. And from his point of view, why should he? We have already seen in Acts 21 that Paul, as a Jew, saw no contradiction with observance of the law and faith in Jesus.

Paul concludes, *Rather we uphold/establish the law.* What does this mean? The goal of the Torah was the coming of Messiah, to be Saviour, not only for the Jews but for the gentiles also in fulfilment of the promise given to Abraham (Genesis 12:3a). The confession of faith (the Shema) of every Jew is this, *Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one* (Deuteronomy 6:4). Since God is One He is God not only of the Jews but the gentiles also (Romans 3:29). In proclaiming Jesus as Messiah for Jews and gentiles, Paul was upholding the law in its entirety. The gentiles need not/should not become Jews to be saved (and thus be subject to the whole law, Galatians 5:3,) but can be justified by faith in Jesus Christ. Jews need not/ should not become like gentiles to be saved, but also need Messiah to be put right with God. The law is upheld, but obligations to the law (teaching of the Torah) differ for Jews and gentiles.