

Annual Moore College Lectures  
2011

# Paul and the Law

## Keeping the Commandments of God



Public Lecture Overview

9<sup>th</sup> August 2011

Lecture Notes



# Paul and the Law

## *“Keeping the Commandments of God”*

### I. Critical, Complex and Controversial

Understanding Paul and the law is critical to our understanding of the history of the early church, in particular Paul’s opponents and Paul’s part in the Parting of the Ways.

“This is the man who teaches all men everywhere  
against our people and *our law* and this place”  
(Acts 21:28)

The doctrines of salvation, salvation history, Israel, the church, anthropology, ethics and eschatology all depend on Paul’s teaching on the law. The very fabric of Paul’s thought unravels unless we know how the Christian relates to the law.

“The way to test the greatness and incisiveness of any truly evangelical theology is to ask how it relates biblical law to God’s gospel of grace. The history of the Church’s achievement on this issue has not been remarkable or convincing.”  
(Walter Kaiser)

Scholars agree about only one thing concerning Paul and the law:

“Paul’s views on the law are *complex*.”  
(Ben Witherington III)

“Paul and the law – The subject is *complex*.”  
(Donald A. Hagner)

“Current discussion of Paul’s view of the law ... has become extraordinarily *complex*.”  
(D.A. Carson)

“There is nothing quite so *complex* in Paul’s theology as the role and function which he attributes to the law.” (James D.G. Dunn)

“There is a general agreement that Paul’s view of the law is a very *complex* and intricate matter which confronts the interpreter with a great many puzzles.” (Heikki Räisänen)

“This is *complex*.”  
(N.T. Wright)

## II. Make up your mind – Alleged Pauline Contradictions

The crux of the problem of Paul and the law is the fact that his letters present both negative critique and positive approval of the law. On the one hand, Paul can describe the law as “holy, just and good,” a very positive gift of God, and can quote it for moral exhortation. On the other hand, he speaks of the law as an enslaving power, increasing trespass and used by sin to bring about death.

Was Paul confused? Did he change his mind?

“Christ has abolished the law  
with its *commandments* and ordinances.”  
(Eph 2:15)

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.  
“Honor your father and mother”— this is the first *commandment* with a promise.”  
(Eph 6:1-2)

“Circumcision does not matter and uncircumcision does not matter,  
but keeping God’s commandments does.”  
(1 Cor 7:19)

## III. Solving the Puzzle

1. *Treat the law as a unity*

2. *Look at all the evidence*

3. *Use Biblical Theology*

## IV. A Hermeneutical Solution

“Tell me, you who want to be under the law,  
are you not aware of what the law says?”  
(Gal. 4:21; TNIV).

Not, *which bits*, but *as what*?

For Paul *nomos* “is always the same collection of texts, but the import of those texts shifts dramatically in accordance with the hermeneutical perspective at each stage of the unfolding drama.” (Richard B. Hays)

Paul does not uphold the law for Christians “as *lex*, as ongoing legal demand, but rather its continuity is sustained in that it points to and anticipates the new ‘righteousness from God’ that has come in Christ Jesus.” (D.A. Carson)

It is best to “take the negative statements [about the law in Paul’s letters] as referring to νόμος understood *as commandments*, and the positive statements as referring to the broader meaning of νόμος, namely *as Scripture*.” (Donald Hagner)

It is not the law “as a revelation of the character and will of God” but “as a written code, threatening death instead of imparting life” that has been done away with in Christ” (F.F. Bruce, commenting on Eph. 2:15)

“There is a sense in which the Law *as Mosaic covenant* is abolished, but the Law *as Scripture* has ongoing value for Christians.” (Brian Rosner; 1994)

Paul is negative about the law *as law*, but positive about the law *as prophecy* and *as wisdom*.

## V. The Law as Law

Paul conceives of the law as letter that kills, as a book that brings a curse, as decrees that stand against us, and as commandments to be obeyed. According to Paul this is not how the law relates to Christians. The good news is that when it comes to the Law of Moses, God doesn’t hold us to the letter of the law nor does he throw the book at us!

“The law, *as law*, is meant to be observed: only so can the life and blessings that it promises be enjoyed.” (Stephen Westerholm)

“The Law originally had the primary function of *defining the identity of God’s elect people*, the Jews. Within that hermeneutical perspective, the Law was understood primarily as *commandment*.” (Richard B. Hays)

### *What is the Origin of Paul's View?*

1. Jeremiah 31:31-33, Ezekiel 36:22-32 and Daniel 9:9-16a, 18b lament that the Mosaic covenant and law have failed due to human sinfulness and declare that the time has come, or will come, when people must look to God's mercy and grace alone apart from the law.

2. Paul's calling and conversion.

“For Paul, the encounter with the Resurrected One near Damascus set before him the question of the *law or Christ* in the form of a *soteriological* alternative. For Judaism of that time the *Torah* was in manifold expression the essence of salvation, and could be identified with the fundamental religious metaphor, ‘life.’” (Martin Hengel)

## **VI. The Law as Prophecy**

A number of scholars have explored the prophetic character of the Pentateuch, including Walter Moberly, John Sailhamer, Francis Watson, Gary Millar and William Horbury.

“From morning until evening Paul explained the matter to them, *testifying to the kingdom of God* and trying to convince them about Jesus both from *the law of Moses* and from the prophets.”  
(Acts 28:23)

“Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures.” (Rom. 1:1-2)

“But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” (Rom. 3:21-22)

“Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means!  
On the contrary, we uphold the law.” (Rom. 3:31)

“The coming of Christ means for Paul that the law has lost its defining covenantal function and instead exercises *a primarily prophetic role*.” (Markus Bockmuehl)

## VII. The Law as Wisdom

“Just as our dear brother Paul, according to *the wisdom* given to him, has written to you.” (2 Peter 3:15)

Paul calls the Corinthians to “become wise”(1 Cor 3:18); deplores the fact that none of the Corinthians is wise enough to settle the dispute between brothers (1 Cor 6:5); calls the Roman Christians to “be wise about what is good” (Rom 16:19); prays that believers will be filled with the perception of God’s will in all wisdom (Col 1:9-10); admonishes and teaches “in all wisdom” (Col 1:28) and expects believers to do the same (Col 3:16); and tells the Colossian Christians to be “wise in the way you walk” (Col 4:5) and the Ephesian Christians to “be careful how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise” (Eph 5:15).

“You must observe them diligently, for this will show *your wisdom and discernment* to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is *a wise and discerning people!*’” (Deut. 4:6)

“The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul;  
the decrees of the LORD are sure, *making wise the simple.*”  
(Ps 19:7)

“Your commandment *makes me wiser* than my enemies,  
for it is always with me.” (Psalm 119:98)

“Those who keep the law are wise children”  
(Prov. 28:7)

*Two Examples:*

1. Tithing

2. Stealing

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