

Elephants in the Room

What Paul Really Meant by His Comments on the Law

by
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Messianic Judaism is similar to other “Judaisms” in seeking to observe the laws of *Torah* that God gave to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. Since those early days, many changes have occurred that impact our ability to keep the Law as our ancestors did. They include (1) a change in the Covenant, (2) Yeshua’s birth, ministry on earth, death, and resurrection, (3) universal accessibility to the Holy Spirit, (4) expansion of the Scriptures to include the New Testament, (5) lack of a functioning Levitical Priesthood, (6) absence of the Temple of God and, most important of all, (7) salvation through faith in Yeshua. These are the New Covenant realities under which we now live. Consequently the way we keep the Law today cannot be solely according to the letter; rather, it must be guided by the Holy Spirit for both wisdom and application.

But as we seek the Holy Spirit for how to keep the Law, we are hindered by ever-present “elephants in the room.” The “elephants” of which I speak are the well-known writings of the Apostle Paul which seem to say that obeying the Mosaic Law is no longer profitable and may even cause spiritual harm. I knew it was not so, but because I have had to restudy and rethink Paul’s statements every time someone raised them to me in debate, I decided to write this short commentary in order to explain what I believe Paul really meant in his writings.

Each numbered caption that follows is a statement one often hears from opponents of observing Biblical Law. Then following each caption are Scriptures (translated in the New King James), authored by Paul, that are often used to support erroneous views of the Law, and after that comes my commentary. The New King James translation is used (with “Messiah” replacing “Christ” and “Yeshua” replacing “Jesus”)¹ because it and the NIV are among the most popular, and the most egregious in misrepresenting Paul.

1. We no longer have to obey the Law because we are now under grace.

Romans 6:14: *“For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.”*

This sounds like Paul is saying that God’s “grace” releases us to do anything we want, and from having to obey any of God’s laws. Why would the Apostle Paul, a confessed keeper of the Law (Acts 21:17-26), say such a thing? Did Yeshua’s appearance on earth and subsequent sacrifice cause God to change into a permissive liberal? I knew that couldn’t be the case, but still, what Paul said perplexed me, so I decided to pray and ask God about it.

¹ This is done for Messianic Jewish acceptability.

What I believe I heard prophetically in reply is this: Being “under grace” is not automatically permissive as some would like it to be. Grace does sometimes imply permissive allowance or forgiveness, but being under God’s grace does not mean that He always grants it to us. Rather, it means that we are subject to the operation of God’s grace, and that He (and only He) decides when to extend it and when to withhold it.

Theologians often define “grace” (*kharis*) as “God’s unmerited favor” (which is correct) but, in his writings, Paul uses it metaphorically to mean “God Himself,” whose very person embodies grace.” Romans 6:14 is therefore informing us that our accountability is no longer merely to the “statutes” of God’s written Word (His *Torah* or Law), but is now directly to God Himself through the living Word, who is Yeshua (John 1:14). Our being “under grace” is Paul’s way of saying that, in this direct accountability to God, God may either extend His grace to us or withhold it, on a case by case basis, according to His supreme sense of mercy and justice. Our being “not under law,” (the Greek word here for “under” is *hupo*, meaning “underneath”) connotes that we are no longer “underneath” the Law’s enforcement; that is, we no longer automatically receive the Law’s penalties for disobedience, but there is no doubt that we continue to be (and are now directly) subject to God’s correction and punishment (as well as His praise and reward) when we are deserving of them. Meanwhile, the commandments of *Torah*, as interpreted by the Holy Spirit, retain their relevance in being a main source for our determining God’s Will, but our “obedience” relationship with God is now direct rather than indirect. That is why Paul says in Galatians 5:18:

“But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”

And similarly in Galatians 3:24-25:

“Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Messiah, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith [meaning “Messiah”] has come, we are no longer under a tutor.”

What I have said about “grace” thus far has been in response to Paul’s juxtaposing “grace” and “law.” I would, however, be remiss were I not to mention another kind of grace that God never withholds. It is God’s empowerment, through the Holy Spirit, to do as well and as much as God, in His sovereignty, is willing to release us to. So it would seem, for example, that God always extends grace to a person who seeks His power for obedience, and to do good. We depend on God’s grace to perform His will.

2. We are justified by faith & not by the Law, so the deeds of the Law no longer have value.

In Romans 3:20 and 28, Paul says:

“Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. ... Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.”

And in Galatians 2:15-16 & 21:

“We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Yeshua the Messiah, even we have believed in Messiah Yeshua, that we might be justified by faith in Messiah and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified. ... I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Messiah died in vain.”

These Scriptures and others like them are often quoted to deny the Law’s continuing value in the New Covenant. After all (some think), if righteousness cannot be acquired from performing the deeds of the Law, then why do them? The answer is that, with the power and discernment that the Holy Spirit allows us, we perform the deeds of the Law because they are God’s will – not in order to become righteous and acquire salvation.

Paul is very clear that no one is justified (i.e. made righteous – saved) through merely obeying commandments. Justification comes only through our reliance on Yeshua’s sacrifice that expunges our sins if we receive Him and repent; that’s why Galatians 2:16 states:

“.. a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Yeshua the Messiah..”

Romans 3:28 says the same thing but differently; it says:

“.. a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.”

None of this contradicts Paul’s contention that God’s Law continues to have value in the New Covenant. We can be certain of this because in Romans 3:31 Paul says:

“Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law.”

3. We are now dead to the law, having been delivered from It.

In Romans 7:4-6, Paul says:

“Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Messiah, that you may be married to another-- to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God. For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.”

Also, in Galatians 2:19-20, Paul says:

“For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Messiah; it is no longer I who live, but Messiah lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

The expressions “dead to the law,” “died to the law,” and “delivered from the law” have led many to believe that God’s Law no longer applies to us. That is not at all what Paul is saying.

In Romans 7:4-6, Paul is comparing our relationship with God to the intimate relationship of marriage. Prior to the New Covenant, our “marriage” relationship with God was mostly through our obedience to the statutes of *Torah* because we did not yet have Yeshua’s sacrifice or the Holy Spirit to draw us closer. It was a wonderful relationship, but God made it even better by sending Yeshua who sacrificed Himself for us. This brought us into a “marriage” relationship with Yeshua that was more intimate than our marriage relationship through the Law. But because it is not God’s will that we be in two marriages at the same time, Paul explains that we died during our marriage to the Law in order to clear the way for our “marriage” to Yeshua. That is what Paul meant when he said:

“you also have become dead to the law through the body of Messiah, that you may be married to another –” and his other saying: *“I through the law died to the law that I might live to God.”*

Paul’s reference to being “delivered from the Law” and being “held” by the law is a continuation of his metaphor that we have moved from one marriage relationship to another. It is not as some believe – Paul stating that God’s Law held us in bondage. I said “God’s Law” instead of just “Law” purposely, in order to illustrate how much easier it is to accept that some nondescript “Law” held us in bondage, than to think that “God’s Law” held us in bondage, which we know cannot be true. Also, Paul’s reference to the “newness of the Spirit” and the “oldness of the letter” is completely consistent with the Scriptures and everything else Paul said because, in the New Covenant, our principal way of relating to God has changed. Paul recognizes our changed relationship to the Law, but at no time infers that the *Torah* has been done away with or has been rendered useless.

4. The Mosaic Law is a curse, and those who seek to obey it are under its curse.

Galatians 3:10-13: *“For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them. But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for “the just shall live by faith.” Yet the law is not of faith, but “the man who does them shall live by them.” Messiah has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”), ...”*

Once again, the words that Paul uses are often misconstrued – in this case, the word “curse,” which some would have us believe means that God’s Law is a curse. No, the curse to which Paul is referring originates in Deuteronomy 30:19, which reads:

“I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live;”

When these words were given by God to Moses under the previous covenant, the context was ‘covering over sin’ through obedience to the Law and animal sacrifice. Israel’s choice to either obey the Law and live, or disobey and not live, was a reference to salvation that, unbeknown to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai, would be granted in the future as a result of Yeshua’s sacrifice. Paul’s words paralleling Deuteronomy were spoken many centuries after Sinai under the New Covenant, when our path to salvation had been transferred from conducting animal sacrifices to having faith in Yeshua, the ultimate sacrifice. Paul was warning the Jews of Galatia to not seek covering over of their sins in the old way of obedience to the Law with attendant animal sacrifices, but rather to seek salvation in the new way which was through Yeshua. Not only was the old way no longer authorized, but under it, even a single violation would result in the cursing referred to in Deuteronomy 30:19 that led to death. But Paul is clear in Galatians 3:11 (NKJ) that in the New Covenant:

“no one is justified by the law,”

and he quotes Habakkuk 2:4 (see also, Romans 1:7 and Hebrews 10:38):

“the just shall live by his faith.”

Bottom line: It is not a curse to seek to keep the Law; the curse comes from trying to keep it as a means of acquiring salvation.

5. It no longer matters what we eat, or drink, or whether we keep God’s special days.

Colossians 2:16-17: *“So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Messiah.”*

This Scripture is sometimes used to assert that God’s food laws, appointed times, and other special days commanded in Scripture are no longer in effect, and that those who adhere to them are putting themselves back under the “Law of sin and death,” and even denying Yeshua. Now that’s a pretty ominous charge for merely resting on the Sabbath and abstaining from pork. To see what is actually being said here, let’s widen our search to verses of Scripture that come both before and after:

Before: Colossians 2:8: *“Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Messiah.”*

After: Colossians 2:20-22: *“Therefore, if you died with Messiah from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations--*

"Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," which all concern things which perish with the using-- according to the commandments and doctrines of men?"

Notice that the words in verse 16,

"let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths,"

is sandwiched between verse 8 and verses 20-22 that warn against becoming captive to the traditions, commandments, and doctrines of men. But God's *Torah* regarding permissible foods and how to keep His festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths, are not the traditions of men, so Paul was not, therefore, advocating disregard for the *Torah*. Rather, he was warning us against being in bondage to "fences" that some would place around the *Torah* – rules promulgated by men that are beyond and more stringent than those commanded by God.

6. The Mosaic Law was defective & is now obsolete.

Hebrews 8:6-7 and 13: *"But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second.... In that He says, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away."*

These verses of Scripture are sometimes used, in conjunction with others, to assert the Mosaic Law's inadequacy, defectiveness, and obsolescence. But if those making the assertion would look at the Scriptures carefully, they would see that what is being spoken of is the Mosaic Covenant – not the Mosaic Law. A covenant is a relationship – an agreement between parties. The Mosaic Covenant was the relationship that was consummated at Mt. Sinai between God and the Israelites, where God gave the Israelites His Laws (the *Torah*), and the Israelites promised to obey. Well, they didn't obey, and they consequently breached the Covenant; the word "breach" and "fault" are the same. The Covenant between God and the Israelites developed a fault that was not intrinsic to the covenant agreement, but rather one that was created by the Israelites' disobedience. We see this clearly in Hebrews 8:8 that says:

"Because finding fault with THEM, He says: "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah ..."

Notice how the Scripture says "*finding fault with THEM..*" The fault was with the Israelites – not in the design of the covenant. Then we read in both Hebrews 8 and Jeremiah 31 that, rather than God leaving Israel without a covenant (which He could have done and which they deserved), He graciously gave them a New and different covenant that was based on better promises. In the process of doing that, He allowed the First Covenant to gradually pass into oblivion; that is what Paul means by the First Covenant becoming obsolete.

So, do we need to obey the Mosaic Law? Well, yes and no! Part of the Mosaic Law can no longer be complied with because it has lost its covenantal infrastructure. We have no operative Levitical Priesthood, no Jerusalem Temple in which to conduct animal sacrifices, and no unified leadership of Israel. Yeshua should be recognized by everyone as the King of Israel, and His sacrifice as the reason why many commandments connected to the Temple can no longer be performed. Still, there are many commandments that remain doable, but they have now come under New Covenant administration and are subject to New Covenant enforcement. When added to other mandates of the New Covenant, they collectively become what Galatians 6:2 calls “the Law of Messiah.”

7. The Mosaic Law is a ministry of death, so literal observance of it kills.

2 Corinthians 3:5-8: *“Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious?”*

Romans 7:6: *“But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.”*

The 2 Corinthians Scripture refers to the written Law as a “Ministry of Death,” and says that “the letter (presumably of the Law) kills.” It certainly appears to support the view of those who would preach doing away with the Law, yet the Scripture also says that the written Law was glorious – an apparent contradiction. What then is Paul trying to say? Paul is reflecting about the Old Covenant, when the Holy Spirit was not accessible to the average Israelite, and when literal obedience to the Law was indeed the prescribed path to life. But it ceased to be the path to life in the New Covenant when Yeshua’s sacrifice gave us direct access to God, and the Holy Spirit was given to us to be the Law’s interpreter. So Paul is warning us that today our approach to God’s Law must be through the Holy Spirit and not through mere literal observance. He is warning us that although literal obedience to the Law led us to life under the Old Covenant, bypassing the Holy Spirit to pursue literal obedience will lead us to death under the New. That is not to say that today the letter of the Law has no application. It does, but it must be the Holy Spirit who gives us the application.

8. The Mosaic Law was done away with by Messiah, so all we need do now is love our neighbor.

Romans 10:4: *“For Messiah is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”*

Galatians 5:14: “*For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*”

These Scriptures have occasionally been used to teach that, when Messiah came, he brought an end to God’s Law because all God ever wanted was for us to love our neighbor, which is the Law’s fulfillment.

Romans 10:4 is easy to explain. Put simply, the word “end” in the verse does not mean “termination of existence,” it means “purposeful destination” as in the expression “the end justifies the means.” It tells us that Messiah is to whom the Law brings us. As for Galatians 5:14, both the Law of Moses and the Gospel of Yeshua stand for selfless sacrifice as against self-interest. When we “*love ‘our’ neighbor as ‘ourselves,’*” we fulfill the ultimate of what the Law stands for, but we are not released from obeying God’s specific and detailed Commandments. If we were, He would have told us.

Conclusion

I hope this commentary helps to clear the “elephants” from the room. We can criticize Paul’s choice of words or the translations of his writings, but what we cannot do is believe that Paul would condone the myriad of anti-law statements that have been attributed to him.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 teaches us:

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Let us keep in mind that the *Torah* (the Pentateuch) that contains the Law of Moses is Scripture, and is therefore profitable for all that 2 Timothy says it is. And by the way – take note of who wrote 2 Timothy – IT WAS PAUL!