

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 21

Paul and the Law

(written and presented by Charles Mickey)

INTRODUCTION

Everyone in this class, unless there are some first-time visitors here, knows that our regular teacher, Mark Lanier, is a lawyer. In fact, we know he is a very good one. I would add that all his clients should count themselves very blessed indeed. About 5 years ago, Mark founded an organization, primarily for lawyers, and he serves as its president. The Christian Trial Lawyers Association (CTLA) now has nearly 700 members in 35 states and 2 foreign countries.

I am privileged to serve as executive director for CTLA and work with all these lawyers and some of their clients. (Please pardon my cheap plug for CTLA here, but Mark would approve.) I served in fulltime church ministry, preaching and doing campus ministry, for 35 years. I am not a lawyer, but I have learned a lot about the legal profession in a fairly short time. One of the things I have learned is that the law and the practice of law can be quite complex. Our CTLA members are ordinary human beings with the ordinary problems we all face, but they want to honor Christ in the legal profession. That is our clear goal in CTLA and that is what I call "swimming upstream." At times, it may be more like trying to swim in the ocean against 15-foot waves. Add that to dealing with complex legal matters on a daily basis and you have quite a challenge. My admiration for lawyers who are committed Christians like Mark grows every day.

"Complex" -- That's the word I used above for the law and its practice in today's world. That's also the word many have used to describe our topic for this class. Mark chose it and you'd think a lawyer should be the teacher on "Paul and the Law," but you've got me instead. He needed a break and when he returns, he can make me the defendant and correct my mistakes. After all, it is complex! Not even Mark has all the answers on this topic. We will try to do an overview.

WHAT MAKES THIS COMPLEX?

Paul can write to the Corinthians that "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law." (I Cor. 15:56) He can write to the Galatians that "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse." (Gal. 3:10) Also to the Galatians, he wrote, "We were held prisoners by the law." (3:23) To the Romans, he wrote, "Law brings wrath." (Rom. 4:15) All these statements are pretty negative, but he also stated to the Romans, "The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous

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and good.” (7:12) To Timothy he observed, “We know that the law is good.” (I Tim. 1:8) So, which is it? Did Paul like the law or not? Did he evaluate it as good or bad or both? Is Paul consistent, despite what appear to be mixed messages?

To complicate the subject even more, Paul could write about “the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2), “the law of faith” (Rom. 3:27), “the law of the Spirit of life” (Rom. 8:2) and “the law of my mind” (Rom. 7:23). These phrases raise other good questions. What did Paul have mind when he used the word “law.” Does he change the meaning of that word in different writings and even within the same writing? If he does, why? How much does the context of his writing determine his meaning? Will we ever be able to figure out what Paul really means?

What do you think of when you hear “the law”? To some, “the law” is any law enforcement officer (police, constable, sheriff, FBI, etc.) and if “the law” is present, you’d better stop doing whatever you’re doing that is unlawful. How many of you rolled slowly through a stop sign on your way to the church building this morning? Maybe you tried to stretch a green light through a yellow light and barely caught a glimpse of a red light as you passed under it? You may have seen other colored lights flashing behind you as you proceeded! That’s especially bad if other church members passed by as “the law” gave you a ticket. That’s no fun and I know! You’ll never hear the end of it. As crazy as it may sound, all of this is somewhat similar to what Paul wants to communicate about the law.

When you think of law, you really have lots of options, ranging from speed limits to income tax, from home association rules to whatever law should be applied to Bernie Madoff’s fraud, and many more. Our teens may think of their curfew. Our younger children may think of where finger paint or crayons can be used. Paul had one primary reference, but there were other options as well. Some were uniquely his. He made them up, we might say, and gave them his own meaning.

THE WORD “LAW”

The Greek word for law is transliterated “nomos.” I personally counted 121 times it is used in the 13 letters of the Greek New Testament which are ascribed to Paul by conservatives. Actually all uses are in only 6 of the 13 (Romans, I Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and I Timothy). I am not including 19 cognates of nomos, such as found in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 7-8, translated “lawlessness,” and in Titus 3:13, translated “lawyer.” (That’s Zenas, not Mark.) You may find a different number than 121, especially in the various English translations.

Often the word has the definite article (“the”) in front of it and that is a big clue to its meaning. Most of the time “the law” is Paul’s way of referring to either the Torah (the first 5 books of the Bible) or to the entire Old Testament (Genesis

through Malachi). Without a doubt, this is what Paul has in mind in most verses, with or without the article. It is the Law of Moses, whether focused in 5 books or spread out in all 39 books of the Old Testament.

Paul uses the same term when he is writing about law in general. I counted 10 uses of *nomos* which I think refer to law in general (Rom. 3:27, 4:15, 5:13, 6:14, 15, 7:21, 23; Gal. 3:21, 5:13 and I Tim. 1:9 -- Notice that some of these references have the word more than once, e.g., Rom. 7:23 in which I am referring to the first of 3 uses.). A few other times Paul changes things up with a phrase or two to go beyond the Torah, the Old Testament and law in general. I counted 13 of these and gave a few examples above (e.g. law of Christ, of faith, of God, of the Spirit, of sin, of righteousness, etc.). We will consider some of these later.

The 121 uses of *nomos* are packed into 87 verses of Paul's writings. (Remember that verse divisions were made many years after Paul.) Of these uses, 106 are found in only two of his letters, Romans and Galatians, and they are really concentrated in very few chapters. Romans 7 has the most with 22, Romans 2 is next with 19 and Galatians 3 has 15. I Cor. 9:20 has 4 uses in only one verse.

It is also worth noting that occasionally Paul refers to the law with other words such as "written code" in Rom. 7:6 and "old covenant" in 2 Cor. 3:14. He writes at some length in 2 Cor. 3:6-18 to contrast the new covenant and the old covenant, but he does not use the word "law" even once. A discussion of this topic cannot be restricted to the verses which contain the word translated "law," but they are a good place to start.

Enough of the counting of words! Let's get to what really counts. Paul told the Galatians that the highest value must not be placed on the law or circumcision as a requirement of the law. "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." (Gal. 5:6) "What counts is a new creation." (6:15)

BRIEF ASIDE: *One of the key principles in understanding the Bible is what I call the "contextual principle of interpretation." Some of the very worst perversions of God's Word come from the failure to use this principle. For example, we've all heard about a mentally disturbed person who began killing people at random. He thought God told him to do it because he read some passage in the Bible like I Samuel 15:3 where Samuel told Saul to kill all the Amalekites. In his mental crisis, he decided the message was for him and the people in his city were Amalekites! More often, a mentally stable person rips a verse or part of a verse out of its context to say what she/he wants it to say and to support an opinion she/he already holds. Instead, we must always read the full verse, the verses before and after, the whole chapter and preferably the whole book. It is the context, above all else, which will help you determine if Paul is*

referring to the Law of Moses, the whole Old Testament, law in general or something entirely different.

Imagine that a specific verse is where a pebble is dropped into the water of a pond and watch the ripples. Follow those ripples all the way to the edge of the pond. As you interpret the Bible, you should follow those ripples first to the beginning and end of each letter or gospel, then to the beginning and end of each author's work (Paul has 13 writings in the New Testament, John has 5, Luke has 2, etc.), then to the entire New Testament or Old Testament, then to the whole Bible. As you study, ask good questions about the historical and political context of the writing, and the author's purpose, as well as the exact meaning of a particular word or phrase. This is really the basis for good theology and the only basis.

PAUL'S BACKGROUND

What happened to Paul on the road to Damascus and immediately afterwards (Acts 9) changed everything. Until then, Paul regarded the Law of Moses as the greatest good, the only guide for life, the way to know and please God. Anything or anyone that challenged that law was worthy of his fiercest attack. When Paul realized that Jesus was the Messiah prophesied in that law and the only means of salvation, he began to see the law very differently.

The difference in Paul's perspectives, before and after his conversion, is especially obvious in what he wrote in Philippians 3. As if he needed to compete with his opponents who boasted in their Jewishness, he described himself, "In regard to the law, a Pharisee...as for legalistic righteousness, faultless." (3:5, 6) Make a mental note of his claim here to blameless obedience of the law. Later he made clear that he considered all his Jewish accomplishments as "rubbish" in comparison to the privilege of knowing Christ (3:8). The actual word here is even stronger than "rubbish," more like dung or manure. What a change in perspective!

GALATIANS

One of the earliest of Paul's letters is Galatians. It is written to correct a false teaching which insisted that Gentiles had to be circumcised, just like Jews, according to the Law of Moses. In other words, faith in Jesus was not enough. Jesus was not enough! Paul was very aggressive in his persecution of Christians before his conversion, but in Galatians he is just as aggressive in his opposition to this heresy. You will not find a more intense preacher than Paul in this letter, where he calls for the eternal condemnation of the heretics twice (1:8, 9). Because the heresy centered on the law and its requirement of circumcision, Paul has much to say about the law and much of it is negative.

Part of Paul's polemic in this letter involves some interesting autobiographical information which Luke did not include in Acts. Paul wanted to emphasize that his message came directly from God, not other men, so his apostolic authority should not be questioned. His gospel should not be changed. He even details an episode in Antioch when he rebuked the apostle Peter for hypocrisy. It seems Peter regularly ate with uncircumcised Gentiles, until some Jewish Christians arrived. After their arrival, he stopped because he was afraid of what the Jewish Christians might say or do. Paul confronted him, asking, "How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ." (2:14b-16a) Later, he added, "For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God." (2:19)

In Galatians 3, there is much more about the law. Paul wrote, "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the book of the law.' . . . Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." (3:10, 13a) Later in this chapter we find one of the most positive things Paul says about the law. He explained the role that the law has in leading us to Christ. "So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law." (3:24-25) This is a picture of a tutor, one who prepares and leads children to school. We will find more about how the law does this in Romans.

ROMANS

Romans was written later than Galatians and it does not have the polemic setting. There is less urgency, less intensity and more space (16 chapters versus 6) to develop some of the themes just touched (or should I say hit?) in Galatians. Many agree that Romans was written to deal with one of the biggest problems in the early church, how to have both Jewish and Gentile Christians in the same church with love and harmony, respect and appreciation. The issue here is not circumcision, but one-upmanship. It was easy for Jews to have pride in their history, or God's story among them and through them. Gentile Christians might have been halfway glad when Jewish Christians were kicked out of Rome (Acts 18:2) and were not sure how to react when Jews were allowed to return. Paul intended to visit the Roman Christians, receive their financial help and go on to Spain, but he also needed to explain God's plan for saving both Jews and Gentiles by the same Savior and in the same church.

There is quite a discussion over Paul's view of the law in Romans. One extreme view is expressed by E. P. Sanders who wrote, "Romans 2 remains the instance in which Paul goes beyond inconsistency or variety of argument and explanation to

true self-contradiction.” (*Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*, Fortress Press, 1983, 147) Sanders’s 1977 book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, caused quite a stir in Pauline studies by trying to prove that the average Jew in Paul’s day would not have been trying to achieve justification by meritorious obedience of the law. He even argued that Paul, before conversion, and other Jews would have known about and believed in justification by grace. Many have argued with him on many points, but the scholar who makes the most sense to me is N. T. Wright.

N. T. Wright believes Sanders’s agenda included “a desire to make Christianity and Judaism less antithetical” and to step away from the anti-Judaism of much Pauline scholarship. He believes many who joined Sanders did so because they shared “his post-Holocaust re-evaluation of Christian-Jewish relations and the implicit relativism which that engendered.” (New Perspectives on Paul, paper at the 10th Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference, August 2003, 2) Wright struggled with Paul and the law until he saw a solution beginning with Romans 10:3-4. “Since they [Israelites] disregarded the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.”

Wright thinks Paul meant that Jews sought their own righteousness, “not in the sense of a moral status based on the performance of Torah and the consequent accumulation of a treasury of merit, but an ethnic status based on the possession of Torah as the sign of automatic covenant membership.” Paul wants to make it clear that such use of Torah, as an ethnic talisman, was an abuse, but at the same time, he is able to make some very positive statements about the law throughout Romans.

Let’s take a look. In Romans 1-2 Paul established that both Gentiles and Jews have a gigantic sin problem. He belabored the point in Romans 2 that being born a Jew and hearing the law are worthless, if there is no obedience. He would even insist on a change of heart so that circumcision, for example, is more than outward or physical, that it be inward, “circumcision of the heart.” (2:28-29) A key statement comes in Rom. 3:20, “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his [God’s] sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.” He continues, “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned...” (3:21-23a) Don’t miss the “no one” and the “all.” Jew and Gentile alike need a Savior, regardless of the law.

Paul makes the point in Romans that the law is holy and good (7:12). Why wouldn’t it be? God gave it. But, as good as it is, it cannot justify the sinner. The fault is not in the law; the fault is in the sinner who may know the good and desire

to do it, but fails because of his sinful nature. That is really the point of Romans 7 and Jesus is the only solution (7:25). Paul begins chapter 7 with an illustration from marriage. The wife is bound to her husband, but not after he dies. The Jew is bound to the law, but not after he dies “to the law through the body of Christ.” (7:4) He is “released from the law.” (7:6) Before that release, however, there was a great war going on inside him.

Rom. 7:7-25 is one of the most difficult passages in all Paul’s writings. Throughout these verses Paul uses the first person pronoun, but most do not think it is autobiographical. T. W. Manson said, “We may call it autobiography if we like, but here Paul’s autobiography is the biography of Everyman.” (Peake’s Commentary, 1962, 945) In verses 7-13, the first-person experience is related in the past tense, but verses 14-25 use the present tense. In the first section, Paul seems to retell the fall narrative of Genesis very briefly and specifically mentions the sin of covetousness which breaks the last of the ten commandments. Paul said it was the law which revealed the sin and even “produced in me every kind of covetous desire.” (7:8) We have no record of anything like this in Paul’s life, but we do have the direct contradiction in Philippians 3:6. In verses 14-25 we have one of the classic descriptions of the divided mind. It is a picture of a man under the law, knowing the law’s requirements are good, desiring to do them, but struggling in the powerlessness of the law against his sinful nature. It is a civil war inside the individual who knows and desires what is right, but cannot act on that knowledge and desire. This tug of war is excruciating. I cannot read this without thinking of the addicted person who struggles on his own unsuccessfully, until he cries out with Paul, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (7:24)

Romans 7:23 is a key verse. In it *nomos* is used 3 times and each has a different meaning. # 1 is “another law at work in the members of my body,” something other than “God’s law” in 7:22. #2 is “the law of my mind.” #3 is “the law of sin at work within my members.” The first two denote opposite principles which wage war within Paul or any person, comparable to the evil and good inclination in Jewish anthropology. But, what is #3, “the law of sin”? Perhaps it is the domination of sin, which in Romans 6 is personified as a slave-master. 7:25b sheds light on 7:23 in the context of slavery, but the next chapter helps even more.

Paul declares jubilantly, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by our sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order

that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to our sinful nature but according to the Spirit.” (8:1-4)

If you hear only one part of this class lesson, I urge you to make it these verses. Here are the insights we’ve needed. So much is packed into these words which explain so many other statements about the law. The law, as good as God made it with great purpose, was powerless, except to point out sin and help us see it as “utterly sinful.” (7:13) The law was weakened by our sinful nature (our flesh) and could not do what God could do and did only through his Son Jesus. God demanded perfect fulfillment of the law and there is only One who could do that. Only One could be the perfect sin offering. Only Jesus could fully meet the law’s requirements and the only way we can be set free from being dominated by the law and sin is to be “in Christ Jesus.” These verses call us to trust Jesus and His sin offering on the cross completely and to live in Him. We want to be conformed to His likeness (8:29) Christ truly is “the end of the law” (10:4). He is the goal, the fulfillment, the One who accomplishes what the law could not accomplish. And, what is that? He made it possible for God to declare us righteous, vindicated, right with Him, free from guilt and the fear of death.

LIBERATED TO LOVE

When a person is “set free from the law of sin and death,” what happens next? What is he/she set free to do and to be? Should there be a wonderful change of perspective such as we saw in Paul?

In the passage mentioned earlier in 2 Corinthians 3:6-18, Paul does not use the word “law,” but he contrasts the new covenant with the old. He says the new covenant is “not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” (3:6) The old covenant came with glory, but it was engraved in letters on stone and it brought death. How much more glorious, Paul asks, is the covenant or ministry that brings righteousness? (3:9) He completes these verses with these words, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” (3:17-18)

The life and the freedom connected in these verses with the new covenant are aimed at one goal. That goal is transformation into the likeness of the Lord. If we are really set free from the domination of sin and the fear of death, we can grow to be more and more like Jesus. Elsewhere in the New Testament, James wrote of “the law that gives freedom” or “the law of liberty.” (James 2:12)

We have been liberated. We are no longer prisoners on death row. The death sentence we all deserved has been dismissed and the One who made it possible for us to be free is the One who draws us now to Himself. We want to be with Him. We want to imitate Him. We want to act like Him, talk like Him and live like Him so much that the highest compliment anyone could ever give us would be to observe that we remind him/her of Jesus. Or, that they can see Jesus in us. Or, that because of us they want to know more about Him.

Despite the intensity we found in Galatians, Paul takes time for practical instructions towards the end of the letter. He told them they were called to be free, not to indulge the sinful nature, but to serve in love. “The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Gal. 5:14) We have been liberated to love!

In another key sentence, he wrote, “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” (Gal. 6:2) What is this law of Christ? Some suggest a reference here to the same commandment in Gal. 5:14, the one Christ called the second greatest commandment (Matthew 22:39). Carrying someone else’s burdens is certainly part of loving a neighbor. And, it is exactly what Jesus did for us. He will carry our heaviest burdens, our guilt, shame and sin, to the cross, if we will let Him. We cannot do that for others, but we can direct them to Him and ease their load in a variety of ways. We can, that is, if we have been liberated.

In Romans 13, also in a section of practical instructions, Paul wrote about government and the believer’s obligation to submit, obey and even pay taxes. Paul was a strong supporter of “the law,” including the local police and government officials, and he saw them as servants of God. Then he recalled that second greatest commandment. “He who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the law.” (13:8) “Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.” (13:10)

Finally, Paul refers to the law a few times in I Corinthians and two of the verses fit well here. If you only know one thing about Paul, it should be that he was a zealous evangelist. Everything he did and everything he wrote were part of his missionary life, including his perspective on the law. He was motivated at his very core to win others to Jesus, so much that he wrote, “To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law...I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.” (I Cor. 9:20-21, 22b) In effect, Paul is saying, “Whatever it takes!”

Loving your neighbors, for Paul, surely included sharing your food, clothes and money, but the greatest way to love them will always be to share the love of Christ with them. Paul would call us to love our neighbors in the very same way.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”* (Philippians 3:9)

Is there anything more valuable to you than Christ -- knowing Him and the power of His resurrection, sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in his death? Paul’s example calls us to be certain that nothing, not even our dearest family member or greatest accomplishment, takes a higher priority than Christ. Paul regarded his Jewish pedigree as stinky trash by comparison to his relationship to Christ. Even his faultless obedience of the law could not hold a candle to knowing Christ. Having a righteousness of his own by keeping the law was worthless. Is there a chance any sort of legalism has crept into your life to give you a righteousness of your own which breeds pride?

2. *“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord! . . . Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”* (Romans 7:24-25a, 8:1)

Does Paul’s description of the internal tug of war in Romans 7 hit pretty close to home? Is there a civil war in you right now? Do you know what is good and what needs to be done, but you just can’t find a way to do it? In fact, despite knowing what is good and wanting to do it, do you find yourself addicted to old sinful habits? Not only unable to do the good, you may be doing the bad things you hate. Please beg for God to rescue you through Jesus our Lord. In Jesus there is no condemnation. Talk with someone you trust and get help today.

3. *“I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.”* (I Corinthians 9:22b)

Loving your neighbor like yourself, according to Paul, surely includes being a messenger of the love of Christ every day to anyone who might be receptive. Is there anyone you are praying for right now and on a regular basis concerning salvation in Christ. Have you ever dared to put in a good word for Jesus when you weren't sure how it would be received. Do you regard evangelism as a gift you don't have and don't want? Are you waiting for someone to ask you about Jesus before you tell anyone, for fear you might be rejected? Paul challenged us to join him in saying, “Whatever it takes to win one to Christ, I will be, say and do!”