

# The Law is Not of Faith

*Galatians 3:10-14*

*With Study Questions*

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**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.”<sup>11</sup> But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for “the just shall live by faith.”<sup>12</sup> Yet the law is not of faith, but “the man who does them shall live by them.”<sup>13</sup> Christ 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”),<sup>14</sup> that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (Galatians 3:10-14).**

## **Something’s Missing**

I occasionally receive magazines published by my former seminaries. I recall one cover story addressing the issue of how a person gets closer to God. Three professors were interviewed. Their answers ranged from things like a more vital prayer life, to becoming a better listener to God to looking for opportunities to serve. None of these things were necessarily bad. But something was missing.

What Paul writes in this portion of this epistle is truly the heart of the Christian faith—his theme for all his epistles. The message here is an oasis for the parched spirit of man—that part of every man who recognizes how incapable he is of getting him close to God.

**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” (Galatians 3:10).**

## **Good = Heaven Bad = Hell**

I remember watching Looney Toons cartoons as a child and learning from these cartoons that if you’re good you go to heaven and if you’re bad you go to hell. As I grew up I found this to be a pretty consistent theme in

popular media. Movies like *Defending Your Life* or *Ghost* either promote this theme or do away with hell altogether. What you virtually never see is anything that actually resembles genuine Christian redemption. Good equals heaven and bad equals hell is what Paul is warring against in the verse before us.

The phrase that should jump out at us is **“all things which are written in the book of the law.”** In other words, if you’re going to approach God with the method of good=heaven/bad=hell then you must keep every commandment. That means moral perfection in every thought, word and deed from conception to death. That makes this an empty set.

**But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for “the just shall live by faith”(Galatians 3:11).**

## **Justification**

It may behoove us at this point to define justification. Justification is a legal and forensic declaration of acquittal. The gavel goes down and God and the judge grants us freedom from the due punishment. Justification has nothing to do with our own behavior, disposition or psychological or spiritual make-up.

When you’re on trial, sitting at the defendants table and the judge reads the verdict, the declaration of acquittal is something that is happening outside of you. It may, and will, have a dramatic affect on where you will spend your future, but as far as justification goes, you’re still the same person.

## **Living by Faith**

Paul quotes from Habakkuk 2:4. He tells us the **“just shall live by faith.”** This concept is quite opposite from what we normally experience. It is the common experience of man for the behavior to dictate the calling. At my home I have now built three fences and two decks. To the journeymen, with the observant eye, I would still not be called a carpenter. My behavior would need to excel still more in order for me to be granted that title – similar with doctors, artists, mechanics, etc.

But in God's economy that matter is turned around. He declares the man to be a carpenter by grace and then inclines his heart toward his tools and labor. God grants us faith, calls us His child, and justifies us by grace. It is after this that we, like Isaiah, say "Here am I, send me." Let us not forget that the Ten Commandments are preceded by "**I am the Lord who delivered you.**" Seeking to obey commandments apart from faith – apart from His gracious deliverance is an exercise in vanity.

The just shall live by faith means that faith in Christ precedes and accompanies<sup>1</sup> all human action. And the expectations of God's favor are a result of His gracious promise, not His response to our ability to perform at some level of excellence. Paul now contrasts this with the law.

**Yet the law is not of faith, but "the man who does them shall live by them" (Galatians 3:12).**

### **Leaning on Christ or Self**

Those who lean on the law for their justification before God, lean on themselves. Those who lean on faith for their justification before God, lean on Christ. In the law it is the man who "does them" but in faith it is Christ who does them (the good works).

This is an interesting quotation Paul uses from Leviticus 18. Some, I believe mistakenly understand this text as to say that men ought not to make every effort to obey the law of God; as if faith and works were enemies. Faith and works are only enemies in the context of justification. To suggest otherwise would make God an ethically inconsistent God. As Calvin observes,

***And the law is not of faith. The law evidently is not contrary to faith; otherwise God would be unlike himself; but we must return to a principle already noticed, that Paul's language is modified by the present aspect of the case. The contradiction between the law and faith lies in the matter of justification. You will more easily unite fire and water, than reconcile these two statements, that men are justified by faith, and that they***

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<sup>1</sup> "shall live" can mean be alive or come to life. But it can also mean to govern life. Since a saving faith is always an active faith there is no reason to create a false dichotomy here.

are justified by the law. “The law is not of faith;” that is, it has a method of justifying a man which is wholly at variance with faith.<sup>2</sup>

D. A. Carson also explains:

**Paul does not develop the ethical implications of faith, it is clear from 5:13–6:10 (and from Rom. 6–8) that he regarded an obedient life (faithfulness) as inseparable from the faith that justifies. The apostle is not using Hab. 2:4 for purposes that contradict the original.** <sup>3</sup>

Calvin further explains:

**And yet it does not follow from this, that faith is inactive, or that it sets believers free from good works. For the present question is not, whether believers ought to keep the law as far as they can, (which is beyond all doubt,) but whether they can obtain righteousness by works, which is impossible.**<sup>4</sup>

## Law and Gospel

There is a great difference between our seeking to live within the boundaries of God’s law and the receiving of God’s promise of salvation by faith. This is the difference between faith and works, law and gospel, the demand and the gift. And the difference between these two things is the difference between heaven and hell.

We must make a distinction between law and gospel or justification and sanctification. In the law it is the man who does; in the gospel it is Christ who does. Now Paul explains how God maintains the purity of His righteous and just character while at the same time forgiving sinners.

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<sup>2</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Galatians* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ga 3:12). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

<sup>3</sup> Carson, D. A. (1994). *New Bible commentary : 21st century edition* (4th ed.) (Ga 3:6–14). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>4</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Galatians* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ga 3:12). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

**Christ 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”) (Galatians 3:13).**

Strictly speaking, faith does not justify us at all but it is Christ who justifies us through faith. So now the object of our faith becomes Paul’s focus. The reason faith is so effective is due to Christ (its object) having bore upon Himself the curse we deserved. Our sin has been imputed (credited to an account) to Christ.

### **A Significant Distinction**

Herein lays a monumentally significant distinction between Biblical Christianity and all other religions. The atheist has no God and therefore cannot give an authoritative account for any objective morality whatsoever. Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, etc. may have some sort of grasp of deity or eternity, but if their God is a just God how can He maintain His just character without condemning every man who sins. If we rail against human courts who wink at sin and launch criminals back into society, what of a deity who does the same?

### **Christ the Curse**

But in the Christian faith, God doesn’t wink at sin nor pretend it just didn’t happen. He punishes sin. This is accomplished by God the Son who took upon Himself a human body and though sinless became sin (2 Corinthians 5:21); though He always pleased His Father (Luke 3:22) He became a curse. The reference Paul uses here of hanging on a tree comes from Deuteronomy.

**If a man has committed a sin deserving of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, <sup>23</sup> his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day, so that you do not defile the land which the Lord your God is giving you *as* an inheritance; for he who is hanged *is* accursed of God (Deuteronomy 21:22, 23).**

The guilty man was usually stoned then put on a tree. He was publicly acknowledged as guilty before men and accursed of God. In the sight of God all men deserve this curse but Jesus was hanged on a tree in our stead. Our sin, guilt, pain, but more than that, the very condemnation and wrath of the Father was poured out on that one righteous Man – the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

### **A Worthy Substitute**

We had a substitute take our place on that cross and in that death. There are times when my children get sick and I would take their pain upon myself. This is a poor analogy for my children are lovely and friendly to me whereas the Scriptures teach that He did this while we were yet enemies (Romans 5:8).

Not only this, I have nothing to trade. Would I give them my pain and age in order to relieve them of theirs? It would be a curse to them. Not so with Christ. He loved us while we were enemies and while taking our curse, He grants us His righteousness. No religion or world view so beautifully or consistently weaves this tapestry of hope, beauty, truth, justice and grace.

This is the heart of the Christian faith and we must be careful that it isn't lost or supplanted by subordinate doctrines. There is a treasury of words which convey this glory to us.

**All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6).**

**Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great, And He shall divide the spoil with the strong, Because He poured out His soul unto death, And He was numbered with the transgressors, And He bore the sin of many, And made intercession for the transgressors (Isaiah 53:12)**

And in Hosea we read how Christ becomes death's worse nightmare.

**I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. O Death, I will be your plagues! O Grave, I will be your destruction! Pity is hidden from My eyes (Hosea 13:14).**

Finally Paul explains how this has always been the plan of God; even going back to the patriarch Abraham and further.

**...that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (Galatians 3:14).**

### **How God is Found**

Christ's effective bearing of the curse of God is the means by which the promise given to Abraham – that all the nations of the earth shall be blessed – is extended to the whole world. This is all based, not upon man's ability or talent, but upon a covenant promise made by God.

Of the bringing in of the gentiles, Paul quotes Isaiah in Romans.

**But Isaiah is very bold and says: "I was found by those who did not seek Me; I was made manifest to those who did not ask for Me" (Romans 10:20).**

At first this seems a little paradoxical; but it's really quite clear. It is yet one more example of the spiritual impotence of man compared to the irresistible and effectual power of the gospel. In the final analysis it might be said that we don't find God. He finds us.

Churches that are full of the Spirit and faith are churches that know and embrace justification by faith. Perhaps in an experiential or existential way, there are things we can do to foster an increased appreciation of what God has done for us. But what should never be left out of the equation is the blessed news that our closeness to God happened when He, through His own Son, came to us. If that message is missing from our faith, then we're building our houses upon the weak and shifting sands. But if our faith for justification – for peace with God – is found in Christ alone, we are on the rock and have received the promise of the Spirit.



## Questions for Study

1. Why would Paul war against the idea of good people going to heaven and bad people going to hell (pages 2, 3)?
2. Define justification (page 3).
3. What does Paul mean when he writes that the just shall live by faith (page 5)?
4. Explain how the law is not of faith (pages 3, 4).
5. What is the distinction between law and gospel and why is it important to know this distinction? Is the law an enemy of faith? Explain (pages 4, 5).
6. How can God forgive us yet maintain His just character (pages 6, 7)?
7. Explain the idea of Christ being our substitute (pages 7, 8).
8. How is God found (page 8)?