

FAQ - Galatians 3:10-13 – Is God’s Law a Curse or Did We Curse Ourselves?

There are many who read Galatians 3:10-13 and conclude that God’s law is a curse and anyone that follows God’s law is under that curse. But is that really what Paul is stating? According to scripture, how is a curse related to God’s law and what places us under it? Why are we cursed? Are we cursed for following God’s law, or not following God’s law (sin)? If our Savior takes away the curse of the law does He take away the whole law (blessings too) or just the curse of God’s law? To understand Paul correctly we need to be able to answer these questions.

Ga 3:10 For as many as are of works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continues not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.

Ga 3:13 Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangs on a tree:

Galatians is perhaps the single letter of Paul that is the cause of the most confusion surrounding God’s law. Once someone discovers that the whole Bible is true and that nothing in God’s Word is abolished it is not long before someone states “go read Galatians again.” This is because many mistakenly believe Galatians teaches against obedience to God's law.

In reality Paul is correcting the false doctrine of salvation through God’s law (legalism). As a result, Paul teaches throughout the letter the correct and simple Biblical process of salvation in faith by grace to counter this false doctrine. Nowhere does Paul teach against obedience to God’s law, just against the doctrine of salvation by God’s law. It is the ability to discern the difference between legalism and obedience that enables a reader of Paul’s letter to draw sound doctrinal conclusions. Confusing legalism with obedience is the root cause of all interpretive error in the letter to the Galatians.

A Brief Introduction on Paul's Writings:

Paul is the only author of Scripture in which we are issued a clear warning about His writings as being rather “difficult to understand” (2 Peter 3:15-17). According to Peter, Paul’s readers need to be stable and educated (know God's Word) or otherwise we are at risk of twisting and distorting Paul's writings to make the "error of lawless men” (make void God’s commandments). Thus anytime Paul is teaching about law, which was quite often, we should exercise extreme caution to ensure we understand exactly what Paul intended us to understand and not make the “error of lawless men.” We need to ensure that we read Paul with a solid Scriptural foundation and approach his writings from a first century Hebraic perspective.

Why are Paul’s letters “difficult to understand” as it relates to the law?

Paul does not always clearly distinguish what law he is referring to in every verse. The surrounding context is always necessary to clue us in. If we always assume Paul is referring to God’s law in his writings then we will build and subscribe to a faulty (law abolishing) theology, making the “error of lawless men.” Instead, to avoid this error, we need to exercise extra effort in extracting valuable context when studying Paul’s letters.

What we frequently discover is that an often cited verse here and another verse there are extracted from Paul’s letters out of context, to support such faulty doctrine or theology. If it is already difficult to determine what law Paul is referring to in the reading of Galatians 2,000 years ago (as Peter warns us), it should be simple to imagine how such poor methodology could further compound such confusion when isolated verses are quoted out Paul’s letters.

Many do not even realize that Paul makes reference to different laws, and that is of course the root cause of

the problem. As it turns out, Paul clearly establishes a pro- “law of God” sentiment in his writings (i.e. Ro 3:31; 1 Timothy 1:8), but also expresses a very anti- “law of sin (and death)” and anti- “commandments of men” position (i.e. Col. 2; Ro 6:14; 8:1-3; Ga 2:4;4:3). If we do not establish which specific law or commandments Paul is referencing in his writings when isolating verses, we often decide to quote them to support our particular theology. Consequently, the theology we subscribe to might resemble a doctrine that Peter warns us about (2 Peter 3:15-17). So it should serve us well to do examine these different “laws.”

A Brief Introduction on Paul's usage of the word "law:"

As covered in the above, when reading Paul many make the unfortunate mistake of assuming that the word "law" in Paul's letters is always referencing God's law. In reality, Paul mentions several different types of laws. We need to equip ourselves with the ability to recognize the difference between these laws before reading his letters, especially Galatians. If we can not accurately identify the correct law Paul is teaching on or against, then Paul will certainly be “difficult to understand”, as opposed to easy to understand. We might not even have realized that we have confused ourselves or others.

1) “Law of Sin (and death)” vs. the “Law of God”

Example #1: Ro 7:22-25 For I delight in the law of God after the inward man:

But I see **another law** in my members, warring against the **law of my mind**, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the **law of sin**.

Example #2: Ro 8:2 For the **law of the Spirit** of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the **law of sin and death**.

- The law of the Spirit of life that was in Y'shua (Jesus) is the same as the Law of God (Spiritual mind)(Ro 8:5-10). The Spirit teaches us His Truth (John 14:17,26)(John 16:13)(1 Jn 2:27) and God's law is the Truth (Ps 119:142)(Mal 2:6)(Ro 2:20)(Gal 5:7)(Ps 43:2-4)(Jo 8:31-32). The Spirit can not be separated from God's law, as it is through the Spirit that we are to keep God's law (Ez. 36:26-27)(Jer. 31:31-33) thus God still only has one law (light) for His people to be obedient to and to bless us (Lev 19:34)(Lev 24:22)(Num 9:14)(Num 15-16)(Num 15:29)(Is 42:6)(Is 60:3)(Mat 5:14) (Eph 2:10-13)(Ac 13:47)(Ro 11:16-27)(Jer31:31-34)(Ez 36:26-27)(Ez 37)(1 Jo 2:10)(1 Jo 1:7). The "law of God" is "life" (Job 33:30)(Ps 36:9)(Prov 6:23)(Rev 22:14) and God's law is still Truth and instructions in righteousness (Ro 3:31; 7:12,21; 1 Ti 1:8; 2 Tim 3:16-17).

- The “law of sin” leads us all into death (Ro 5:12) which is why Paul also calls it the “law of sin and death” (Ro 8:2).

- The “law of God” is also referred to as "commandments of God" (1 Cor. 7:19). Paul delights in and serves the “law of God” (Ro 7:22-25).

- The war between the “law of sin” and the “law of God” continues in all believers. Our goal is the Spiritual mind that serves the “law of God” which is against the carnal “law of sin.”

- It is the “law of sin” that brings us into captivity and bondage, not the “law of God.” The “law of God” is defined as freedom in Scripture (Ps 119:45)(Jam 1:25, 2:12). The “law of sin” is defined as bondage. Thus disobedience (sin) is bondage and obedience is freedom. Commandments of men and “elements of the world” are also considered bondage according to Paul (Ga 2:4;4:3) which is also not the “law of God.”

2) “Oral Law” and “Commandments of Men”

In the first century, mainstream Jewish leadership practiced something called the “oral law” (Talmud). Paul

refers to this doctrine as the “works of law” or “commandments of men.” Y’shua (Jesus) also referred to the “oral law” as the “traditions of the elders” that violates the “law of God” (Mark 7; Matthew 23). There is much that can be said about the “oral law”. However, at a very basic level, the “oral law” consisted of doctrines, teachings, and commandments of men that much of the mainstream Jewish leadership of the first century elevated above the commandments of God. In some cases the “oral law” even contradicted the commandments of God. This major issue of the first century is also the point and purpose of Y’shua’s (Jesus’) teaching in Matthew 5, His rebuking in Mark 7, and many of His other points of contention with Jewish leadership during the length of His ministry. The critical point to remember here is that there is a clear difference between the “commandments of men” and the “commandments of God.” In Galatians Paul refers to such doctrine, elements of the world, and commandments of men as bondage (Ga 2:4:4:3).

Now that we briefly understand the different laws that Paul references we need to understand the three major issues Paul needs to address in his letter to the Galatians.

A Brief Overview on the Debates in Galatia (The Context):

In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, there are three (3) major issues Paul is correcting:

1) Galatians are falsely taught to keep God’s law for salvation.

False teachers (“Circumcision Party” - Ga 2:7-12; 5:12 and “Works of Law” - Ga 2:16;3:2;3:5;3:10) began promoting their doctrine (“oral law”) that required Gentiles to be circumcised in a certain way, and also taught that all commandments of God coupled with commandments of men need to be followed before one can be justified for salvation.

Ga 2:16 Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.

This theme continues throughout Galatians: (i.e. Ga 2:21; 3:2; 3:3; 3:5; 3:11; 5:4)

“Works of Law”

Qumran document 4QMMT (4Q394-5) gives us some insight to a Jewish sect in the first century called “Works of Law” The Jewish sect of Works of Law believed many things in their doctrine that were contrary to God’s law and also taught that Gentiles could not be saved. They were, in effect, not living God’s law in faith but in fact living their own invented law-which was a twisted form of God’s law (similar practice of the 6 sects of the Pharisees). Their doctrine was very similar to those of the “Circumcision Group. This would be why Galatians 6:13 states that this group that is supposedly teaching God’s law for salvation does not even “keep God’s law themselves”

“Circumcision Party”

The Jewish sect of the “Circumcision Party” appears in Acts 10:45;11:2; 15; Ga 2:7-12 Ga 5:12; Eph. 2:11; Titus 1:10.

2) The Galatians began to focus on pleasing men (commandments of men) instead of pleasing God (commandments of God).

As a result of the doctrine from the “Works of Law” and the “Circumcision Party”, the Galatians became more consumed with pleasing men (following commandments and doctrines of men) than pleasing God (following commandments of God).

Ga 1:10 For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ.

This theme continues throughout Galatians: (i.e. Ga 1:10; 1:11; 2:3; 4:3; 4:9; 6:12; 6:13)

God's commandments are designed to love God (1 John 5:2-3). Commandments of men draw man's attention to men and negate the purpose of God's commandments (Mark 7).

3) The Galatians were also still engaging in their cultic sun god worship practices and holidays.

We also know that converted Gentiles in Galatia were falling back into the cultic pagan temple practices they were previously familiar with. This is why James focused on correcting such pagan activity first. For example, he did this in Acts 15:20, before the Gentiles could be expected to learn the rest of the "law of God" in the synagogues every Sabbath (15:21). Paul addresses this problem in more detail in Galatians 4, as it relates to being in bondage in "elements of the world" (sun god worship) and "going back" to their old gods; serving them in their holidays and established calendar patterns.

As a result of all of the above problems, Paul's solution was to teach the Galatians that the law can not justify anyone into God's plan of salvation. Therefore Paul focused on faith and grace to counter the several (primarily 3) false teachings penetrating and impacting Galatia. Many make the mistake that because Paul is teaching against being justified by works of the law (legalism), that Paul was teaching against God's law. Legalism (wrong) and obedience (right) are two completely different concepts. What we find is that Paul simply teaches the Galatians the process of salvation (simply removing the curse of the law).

So now we should have the foundation necessary to examine the often misunderstood verse(s).

The Verses in Question: Galatians 3:10-13

Ga 3:10 For as many as are of works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.

Ga 3:11 But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith.

Ga 3:12 And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them.

Ga 3:13 Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree:

So is God's law a curse or are we cursed for breaking God's law?

We need to read and apply what Paul is saying here. Let's go back to the beginning and see what God says His law is intended to do:

Dt 11:26 Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse;

Dt 11:27 A blessing, if ye obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you this day:

Dt 11:28 And a curse, if ye will not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside out of the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods, which ye have not known.

Gods law blesses and curses: (Deut 11:26-27)(Ps 112:1)(Ps 119:1-2)(Ps 128:1)(Prov 8:32)(Is 56:2)(Mat 5:6)(Mat 5:10)(Luke 11:28)(Jam 1:25)(1 Pe 3:14)(Rev 22:14)

This is where the concept of the "curse of the law" originates. Paul is not inventing something new, nor is he calling the "law of God" a curse. The curse is clearly not God's law. The "curse" is clearly stated to be the result of our breaking God's law. Have we all broken God's law? Yes! So we all have to deal with the "curse of the law" that we are under. If we never deal with the curse of the law that we are all under then

we will go through the second death at the Great White Throne judgment.

1Jn 3:4 Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law.

God's law can only do three things, bless, curse, and define sin.

The curse of the law is the second death. Because of our sin (breaking God's law) we all deserve death (Romans 5:12). However, once we have faith in the finished work on the cross, we enter into His grace and are no longer under the "law of sin and death(curse)" (Romans 8:1-3).

Y'shua (Jesus) died on the cross to take away our sin [thus our curse(death) away], not God's law.

This is simply all salvation 101 teaching right? This is nothing new. We all know that Y'shua (Jesus) died on the cross for our sins, taking away in grace the curse of the second death that we all deserved because of our sin.

Why does Paul need to teach something that seems so simply and elementary to us? Verse 3:11 makes it clear.

Ga 3:11 But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith.

The Galatians were trying to be justified by the law of God. Obviously anyone trying to be justified by God's law needs to be taught the process of salvation (through faith by grace) all over again. Paul makes it clear that we are live God's law by faith(verse 12), not for justification.

Anyone trying to be justified by God's law, instead of being justified in faith by God's grace, is still under the "curse of the law" (law of sin and death). The only way to not be under the "curse of the law" (law of sin and death) is to accept God's grace in the work on the cross.

Again, the law only does three things: defines sin (obedience or disobedience), curses us, and blesses us.

Once the law defines sin for us, we then realize that we are under the curse of the law (law of sin and death). We then realize that we require a Savior to remove that curse (second death). This is where grace offers us salvation to remove the curse of the law in our faith. If the Galatians believe keeping the law saves, then they are not going to realize that they need a Savior to save them. This is exactly what Galatians 3:22-25 teaches us, which is the next often cited point of confusion in Galatians (Law as a "schoolmaster").

Now that the curse is abolished after our faith is established, what does that then leave us in respect to the "law of God?"

We are still left with the "law of God" defining sin (disobedience) and blessings (obedience), as the curse (Deut. 11:26) is now gone. This is why Scripture focuses so much on the blessings of the "law of God" for the obedient believer. (Ps 112:1)(Ps 119:1-2)(Ps 128:1)(Prov 8:32)(Is 56:2)(Mat 5:6)(Mat 5:10)(Luke 11:28)(Jam 1:25)(1 Pe 3:14)(Rev 22:14).

It is the unbeliever that is still under the curse of the law (second death)(law of sin and death). The Spiritual mind is after the "law of God" (freedom from sin), and thus receives all of the blessings in obedience to God's law.

Clearly God's law is not a curse, but we cursed ourselves by not obeying God's law (law of sin and death). That is why we need a Savior. The Savior did not come to abolish God's law, but to take away the curse we deserve from not obeying God's law.

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