

Are We Saved by Works – the Keeping of Rules or Regulations  
– Or Are We Saved by Simple Faith in God's Marvelous Grace?

Growing up in a Pentecostal atmosphere I heard an assortment of “do's and don't's” in order for a believer to be saved and live the Christian life. I am sure the intention of those who propagated such teachings were sincere – even, helpful, in some instructions – however, God's Word is extremely clear on the matter of our salvation being based solely in the grace of God and not by our doing – or not doing – certain acts of keeping certain a set of rules, or abiding by specified church policies.

While this study deals with “the Law” verses God's grace, it also pertains to “rules and regulations” laid down by some in order for the believer to be saved.

The New Testament refers time and time again of God's marvelous grace verses “the Law” that He gave through Moses at Mount Sinai in the Old Testament. Most Christians, however, do not have a great deal of problem with “the Law” – (with the exception of those denominations that are founded upon the keeping of the Law) – but the problem of this day a age among many believers is attempting to live by “rules and regulations” that they deem essential for salvation.

It certainly is not the intent of this study to imply that doing God's service – and seeking diligently to please Him – is not central in Christian living. Living according to the principles of God's Word is imperative for the believer. However, this study seeks to show that salvation comes by God's grace alone, not by any works, or deeds, on our part.

The following, from “*The Introduction To The Book of Galatians*”  
In “*The Message Contemporary Language Bible*”  
Will Help Us Understand This Study.

When men and women get their hands on religion, one of the first things they often do is turn it into an instrument for controlling others, either putting or keeping them “in their place.” The history of such religious manipulation and coercion is long and tedious. It is little wonder that people who have only known religion on such terms experience release or escape from it as freedom. The problem is that the freedom turns out to be short-lived.

Paul of Tarsus was doing his diligent best to add yet another chapter to this dreary history when he was converted by Jesus to something radically and entirely different – a free life in God. Through Jesus, Paul learned that God was not an impersonal force to be used to make people behave in certain prescribed ways, but a

personal Savior who set us free to live a free life. God did not coerce us from without, but set us free from within.

It was a glorious experience, and Paul set off telling others, introducing and inviting everyone he met into this free life. In his early travels he founded a series of churches in the Roman province of Galatia. A few years later Paul learned that religious leaders of the old school had come into those churches, called his views and authority into question, and were reintroducing the old ways, herding all these freedom loving Christians back into the corral of religious rules and regulations.

Paul was, of course, furious. He was furious with the old guard for coming in with their strong-arm religious tactics and intimidating the Christians into giving up their free life in Jesus. But he was also furious with the Christians for caving in to the intimidation.

His letter to Galatian churches helps them, and us, recover the original freedom. It also gives direction in the nature of God's gift of freedom - most necessary guidance, for freedom is a delicate and subtle gift, easily perverted and often squandered.

## Is Salvation by Law or Grace?

The question that called for the first church council in Jerusalem was to settle the issue of the relationship of the believer to the Law of Moses (Acts 15). Paul the Apostle had on his first missionary journey preached the Gospel of “*the grace of God,*” without the works of the Law. When he returned from that first missionary journey he rehearsed to the church in Antioch “*all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles*” (Acts 14:27). Paul reported to the church how Gentiles had been saved, without becoming Jewish proselytes, or submitting to circumcision, or keeping the Law of Moses. The Christians at Antioch rejoiced in the good news of the free grace of God.

There reports of Gentiles being saved by grace without the Law, reached Jerusalem, where a group of legalistic Jews insisted that salvation necessitated placing these believers under the Law. These legalists came to Antioch and began to teach the believers,

*“...Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved”* (Acts 15:1)

This started a real dispute between Paul and Barnabas on one hand, and this group of “*Law preachers*” on the other. A real controversy broke out. Dr. Luke reports it this way:

*“Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them”* (Acts 15:2)

Unable to settle the question, they decided to submit the problem to the apostles and elders at Jerusalem. A committee, including Paul and Barnabas, was appointed to go to the apostles in Jerusalem. Upon their arrival in the city they were welcomed by the church, to whom they reported all that the Gospel of God’s grace had accomplished among the Gentiles. However, they were immediately opposed by the legalistic Pharisees, who insisted,

*“That it was needful to circumcise them [the Gentiles], and to command them to keep the Law of Moses”* (Acts 15:5).

The apostles called the church together and tried to settle the controversy, but instead disorder broke out and the meeting resulted in a heated debate. There was much disputing between the two factions which we might well designate as the “*grace party*” and the “*Law party.*” Peter is the first to testify of his experience, and rehearses his visit to the Gentile household of Cornelius, saying that God “*put no difference between us [Jews] and them [Gentiles], purifying their hearts by faith*” (Acts 15:9). Peter calls the Law of Moses a yoke which they themselves [the Jews] were unable to bear (Acts 15:10), and then concludes with his judgment of the matter:

*“But we believe that through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ we [Jews] shall be saved, even as they [Gentiles]”* (Acts 15:11).

Peter's speech came somewhat as a surprise to the legalists, the champions of the Law; and without any more disputing, the assembly listened quietly to the testimony of Paul and Barnabas, corroborating the views of Peter. It was now time for James (apparently the chairman of the meeting) to speak, The silence which followed the testimonies of Peter, Paul and Barnabas, left the opposition speechless. However, it raised a serious question.

Since the Lord was now building a Church, the Body of Christ, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles, while Jesus was in Heaven, then what about all the promises of the Scriptures concerning the Kingdom, and the reign of the Messiah on earth?

All the prophets had clearly foretold that when Messiah should come, He would restore the Kingdom of Israel; deliver them from the Gentile yoke of bondage, and Israel was a nation would dwell in her repossessed land. Were all these prophecies to be cast aside? Should we "*spiritualize*" these promises and apply them now to the Church? If God is now calling out a Church, a body from among the Gentiles, is God then through with national Israel? These were questions that needed to be answered, and James rises to the occasion.

The explanation James gives is the essence of simplicity, yet, it seems, that many scholars have been unable to grasp it. James says that all the promises to Israel concerning the Kingdom will be *literally* fulfilled, but ***not at this time***. First, the Lord is going to carry out a part of His plan, which until now had been "*a mystery*," and then after that, the Kingdom promises to Israel will be realized. The words of James are clear:

*"Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name"* (Acts 15:14).

This is what God was now doing. The Kingdom had been set aside, and God is now "*calling out*" from among the Gentiles a people for His Name - *the Body of Christ* - the Church. This, says James, was in full agreement with the prophecies concerning the Kingdom -

*"...as it is written. **After this** I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up"* (Acts 15:15-16).

*After this I will return! **After what?*** After He has gathered out from among the Gentiles a people for His Name. After this Body of the Church is complete, and "*the fullness of the Gentiles be fulfilled*," then the Lord will return and restore the nations of Israel, and will set up the Kingdom here on earth, and all the prophecies of Messiah's reign will be fulfilled to the letter.

Now comes the answer to the question that brought them together. Are the believers of this Church age under the Law of the Kingdom? Is the believer in this dispensation of grace subject to the Laws laid down by Moses for the nation of Israel? James gives his sentence in the following words:

*“Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God; But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:19-20).*

Not a word about keeping the Law of Moses, not a word about circumcision, but they were advised against three things: Idolatry, fornication, and eating of blood. Abstinence from these things was advised, not on the basis of *Law*, but grace. These Gentiles had been idolaters; fornication was in certain instances a religious rite; and they did not respect the sanctity of the blood. Because these three things were so common among the Gentiles and so repugnant to the Jews, that they were to be especially guarded against, so the Gentiles were warned about them.

A letter is addressed to the Gentiles in various churches -- throughout *Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia* -- and sent by the hand of Paul, Barnabas, and a company of others. The letter is in answer to the question, *“Are the believers - (especially of the Gentiles) - under the Law of Moses?”* A copy of the letter sent by the Jerusalem elders to these areas.

Acts 15:24 reads, *“Forasmuch as we have herd, that certain which went out from us have **troubled** you with words, subverting your souls, saying, **Ye must be circumcised, and keep the Law...**”*

Notice again the problem. The legalists from Jerusalem had claimed that the Gentile Christians at Antioch must become Jews by submitting to circumcision, and to *keep the Law*. Now notice the decision:

*“. . . s o whom we gave no such commandment” (Acts 15:24b)*

These who teach that the Christians are under the Law *pervert the grace* of God. *“We never gave any such commandments,”* wrote the apostles and elders to the church at Antioch. Those who were legalistic were unauthorized, and we now repudiate their demand for *“we gave no such commandment.”* This was the message relayed to Antioch – *“the Gentiles believers are not under the Law.”*

The letter was delivered to the church, *“which when they had read, they rejoiced for the consolation” (Acts 15:31).* The matter should have been settled, but the *“Law teachers”* continued their practice of following Paul everywhere he went, trying to undo the grace preaching of Paul. Everywhere he traveled he was opposed. No less than three books of the New Testament were written to combat errors concerning the Law. There were three errors present from the very beginning of the apostolic age. These were ***legalism, antinomianism, and Galatianism.***

-- *“Legalism”* teaches that men must be saved by keeping the Law. This error is answered in Paul’s epistle to the Romans.

- "*Antinomianism*," the second error was the exact opposite, teaching that it makes no difference how we live, for it is all of grace. This error is answered in the epistle of James.
- "*Galatianism*," the third and most subtle of the errors, is the teaching that we are saved by grace, and then we are to be kept by obeying the Law perfectly, we are saved by faith alone, but then our ultimate salvation depends on our works.

This error is called "*Galatianism*" because it was so prevalent in the Galatian churches, and Paul wrote one whole epistle to refute this error – the epistle to the Galatians.

These three errors are still with us today. Although the matter was settled in the first church council and expounded in the epistles, the errors have persisted. It is with the prayer and hope that this study may be used of the Lord to lead some precious souls out of the bondage and fear of the Law into the liberty of God's grace that this study is made available

– for, ". . . *where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty*" (2 Corinthians 3:17).