

Understanding “The Works of the Law” in Galatians: A Study on Covenant, Identity, and Justification

Introduction: What Is This Study About?

This study seeks to clarify one of the most frequently misunderstood theological issues in the New Testament: **Paul’s teaching on the Law in Galatians**, especially chapters 1 and 2. Christians often assume that Paul is merely contrasting **legalism versus faith**, or **works versus grace**. However, a closer reading within the **first-century Jewish context** reveals something more nuanced.

The following was a group of Christians on a Zoom-based group study that attempts to shed light on what “works of the law” actually meant in Paul’s day and how first-century Jews viewed **covenantal identity, salvation, and law-keeping**. What follows is a cleaned-up and grammatically revised transcript of that discussion. This excerpt serves as the **main teaching material** that launches us into the key biblical and theological insights that follow.

Rewritten Excerpt: What Was Said in the Group Study

*It is really critical to understanding Paul—especially his letters to the Romans and the Galatians. The term “works of the law” refers primarily to **circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath keeping**. Let me explain. I know this might seem like*

nitty-gritty theological detail, but it's actually very important.

When we read "works of the law" and contrast it with "the Spirit," we tend to think—because of how Martin Luther and Protestantism over the last 500 years have shaped our thinking—that the Pharisees were legalistic people who thought they were saved by strictly following all the commandments. That they were trying to earn their salvation through works. But that is not accurate. That is not what they actually believed.

We often assume that Paul is contrasting law-based salvation with salvation by faith. While it's true that we are saved by the Spirit and by grace through faith, it's not correct to assume this means the Jewish people believed in salvation by perfect law-keeping.

The Jewish people—particularly the Pharisees—believed they were saved because they were God's chosen people. Their salvation was rooted in covenantal election, not in perfect obedience. They were in a covenant relationship with God, and while obedience to the law was critical, it was a way of maintaining covenant faithfulness, not earning righteousness.

So, being chosen wasn't sufficient on its own—it was the starting point. From that, the faithful kept the law to show that they were indeed part of the covenant family.

The term "covenant" is essential here. God chose Abraham and his descendants to be His covenant people. If you were one of them, you were—using modern Christian language—"saved." That is, you were part of God's people. The distinguishing feature wasn't perfect obedience but being part of this family.

This is why Jewish people often said, "We are not sinners like the Gentiles." You'll see that phrase in Galatians 2. It's a reference to covenantal identity: Jews were "righteous" (not in the personal holiness sense), while

Gentiles were “sinners”—outside the covenant.

So, Jews believed they were righteous because they belonged to God’s covenant family—not because they kept all the Torah perfectly. In fact, they agreed with Paul that no one could perfectly obey the law. That’s not where the disagreement lay.

Luther didn’t know this because the rabbinic writings from the Second Temple period weren’t available to him. Today, thanks to documents like the Dead Sea Scrolls and other early Jewish sources, we understand far more about what Jews of Paul’s time actually believed.

Here’s where things get tricky for modern scholars—how do we interpret Paul now, knowing what we know? Many scholars are hesitant to revise long-standing views. But we have to reckon with the evidence.

Now, to your point, Anthony—yes, in rabbinic traditions it was acknowledged that no one could fully live up to the law. Salvation ultimately depended on God’s mercy. Obedience was the response to God’s covenantal grace, and when people failed, the sacrificial system was the means for forgiveness. God’s mercy and grace upheld the covenant relationship.

Still, they were responsible to observe the law. For those who lived far from the temple, prayer, fasting, and synagogue worship served as temporary substitutes until they could make pilgrimage.

So when Paul refers to “works of the law,” he’s primarily referencing those three key identifiers: circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath keeping. These were boundary markers that distinguished Jews from Gentiles—signs of being part of the covenant people.

The Gentiles already followed basic moral laws like “Do not murder,” so such commandments were not identity markers. But

circumcision, kosher dietary rules, and Sabbath observance were uniquely Jewish and served as community identifiers.

To be “righteous” in that world meant you were a covenant member—not necessarily morally perfect. “Righteous” was a communal term: you belonged to the people of God.

So the real issue Paul is tackling in Galatians isn’t simply “Are we saved by works or by faith?” It’s more nuanced. It’s: “Are these boundary markers still necessary for belonging to God’s people now that Christ has come?”

Paul says no—they are not. Jesus fulfilled them. Salvation is now through Christ’s death and resurrection, not by adhering to those specific signs of the old covenant.

In Galatians 2, Paul addresses Jewish believers, not Gentile converts. He says: “We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, know that a man is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 2:15–16).

Now, a note on translation: the phrase “faith in Christ” could also be translated as “the faithfulness of Christ.” The Greek is ambiguous. It can mean either. Paul may actually be saying that Jews are saved not by the works of the law, but by the **faithfulness of Jesus**—His obedience unto death. Then Paul adds, “Even we have believed in Christ Jesus,” making the point that our faith is our response to His faithfulness.

Go back to Galatians 1:4. Paul says Christ “gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age.” He’s talking to Jews here. His point: we are saved through Jesus’s sacrifice, not the covenant signs.

Later in the letter, Paul will turn to how Gentiles are brought into this family—not by circumcision, not by food laws, not by Sabbath keeping, but by faith in Christ.

The key message is: Jew or Gentile, inclusion in God's family is through Christ alone.

Theological Evaluation and Explanation

1. What Did “Works of the Law” Mean to Jews?

They did not believe in salvation by perfect performance. Rather, they saw themselves as **already chosen**, and their obedience was a **sign of faithfulness**, not a method of earning grace. This is why sacrifices, prayers, and mercy played central roles even when the law could not be fully kept.

2. What Is Paul Refuting in Galatians?

Not works-based righteousness in a general moral sense, but the **imposition of Jewish identity markers** (circumcision, food laws, Sabbath) as **necessary for salvation**, especially for Gentiles.

3. What Is Meant by “Faith in Christ” or “Faithfulness of Christ”?

Paul uses a Greek phrase that could mean either:

- **Faith in Christ:** our belief in Him.
- **Faithfulness of Christ:** His obedient life and sacrificial death.

Both are true, but Paul often emphasizes **Christ's faithfulness** as the ground of our salvation (Gal. 1:4; Phil. 2:8).

4. Is the Law Still Relevant?

Paul does not dismiss the law entirely. Instead, he affirms its moral core is **fulfilled in Christ** and by those who walk in the **Spirit** (Gal. 5:16–23; Rom. 8:4). The ceremonial and

identity-marking aspects, however, are **no longer required** for covenant inclusion.

□ **Final Takeaway**

This study helps us avoid two extremes:

- Thinking Jews were legalists trying to earn salvation.
- Thinking Christians today can live however they want because “we’re not under the law.”

Instead, Paul teaches that **belonging to God’s covenant family is by grace**, through the **faithfulness of Christ**, and it is evidenced by **faith working through love** (Gal. 5:6).
