

PAUL AND THE LAW

Understanding the “Hard Sayings”

Many of the apostle Paul’s statements about the law may seem confusing, even contradictory; but, with one simple (and often overlooked) key, you will see that the “hard sayings” of Paul’s epistles are not hard at all!

In 1948, well-known biblical scholar W.D. Davies said, “It has long been a matter of controversy among New Testament scholars how best we should interpret the theology of Paul.” This remark is as true today as it was then—especially concerning the study of Paul’s view of the Old Testament law.

The apostle describes the law as a “custodian” from which the Christian has been set free; yet, at the same time, he views the law as “holy and just and good.” He affirms that only “the doers of the law will be justified,” yet declares that all who are in Christ have “died to the law.” To Paul, the law is both “spiritual” and “the power of sin.”

Little wonder Paul’s epistles evoke so much controversy!

Yet, as controversial as they are among scholars, Paul’s seemingly conflicting comments on the law can be easily understood. The solution lies in understanding that the law plays *more than one* role in its relationship to us.

Roles of the Law

Many of Paul’s positive statements about the law are reminiscent of the meditations of Psalm 119 and pertain to only one role of the law.

The Psalmist states, “Oh, how I love thy law! It is my meditation all the day. Thy commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep thy precepts.... Thy testimonies are my heritage for ever; yea, they are the joy of my heart. I incline my heart to perform thy statutes for ever, to the end” (Psalm 119:97–100, 111–112).

Similarly, Paul affirms that “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12). Like the Psalmist, Paul internalizes God’s commandments. “For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self,” he writes (verse 22). The

apostle strongly denounces the idea that Christians, through faith, “overthrow the law,” declaring instead that “we uphold the law” (Romans 3:31).

The Psalmist declares that God’s “word”—His revealed will as expressed through His law—“is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105). It informs its hearers of the attitudes and actions that please and displease God. Similarly, Paul affirms that “All scripture” (which certainly includes the Torah, or section known as “the Law”) is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).

The law, then, is God’s moral and ethical standard, the means through which His good and perfect will is revealed. Meditation upon the law and obedience to its commandments result in wisdom, knowledge, insight, and understanding. It is indeed a “lamp to our feet” and “light to our path.” It teaches us how to live!

The term *Torah*, translated “law” in the Old Testament, literally means “teaching.” The name itself indicates that the primary purpose of the law is *to teach!* This is precisely the function of the law the Psalmist has in mind in his poetic descriptions of the law as the source of knowledge, wisdom, and instruction in righteousness. This is the *educative role* of the law.

However, the law has another function—and understanding this function is vital to a correct understanding of the “hard sayings” of Paul’s epistles. This second function is best described as the *judicial role* of the law.

In its second function, the law acts as a “custodian”—*but only for those who are not “in Christ.”* It is this role of the law Paul has in mind when he says, “You are not under the law but under grace” (Romans 6:14), and when he describes the law as a “custodian” that kept us under its power “until Christ came” (Galatians 3:24).

To understand the judicial role of the law, it is first necessary to understand the relationship between the law and sin.

Paul writes, “What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’ But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead” (Romans 7:7–8).

If there were no law, sin would not exist. But because there is a law, sin does exist. Therefore, it is *through the law* that we become aware that we are sinners; it is “through the commandment” that sin “become[s] sinful beyond measure” (Romans 7:13). It is this relationship between sin and the law that Paul has in view when he says, “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law” (1 Corinthians 15:56), and when he explains that our “sinful passions” were “aroused by the law” (Romans 7:5).

Paul points out that sin entered the world through Adam’s trespass, and that the “Law came in, to increase the trespass” (Romans 5:20). Again, notice the relationship between sin and the law.

By identifying sin, and by making us aware that we are sinners and therefore under condemnation, the law informs us of our need for a Savior—One who can blot out our record of sins and deliver us from the sentence of death. But until we come to the Savior, the law holds us in custody, declaring us sinners and pronouncing the death sentence upon us. In this limited sense, the law is a *curse* to us.

The law, then, has *two* roles:

First, it is our instructor (the educative role), revealing to us God’s way of life—the path He desires that we follow. It expresses the good and perfect will of God, not only explicitly through its many commandments, statutes, and judgments, but implicitly through the creational and historical narratives.

Second, the law acts as our custodian (the judicial role), but only *until* we come to conversion through faith in Christ. By identifying us as sinners and demanding punishment for our sins, the law holds us in custody. Knowledge of the law’s high standards increases our moral awareness and personal responsibility, thus eliminating ignorance as an excuse. Now, sin becomes exceedingly sinful.

But when we come to conversion through faith in Christ, *the law’s role as custodian is abolished*. No longer can the law demand our death, for God has declared us “Not guilty!” No longer can the law declare us transgressors, for the record of our sins has been blotted out. The *curse of the law* has been re-

moved (Galatians 3:13).

Knowledge of the two roles of the law sheds significant light on the seemingly contradictory passages of Paul’s epistles. We should now be able to see how Paul can insist upon meeting the requirements of the law (as in Galatians 5:13–21), while, without contradiction, speaking of the law’s transitory role (Galatians 3:19, 24–25).

Roles of the Law in the Book of Galatians

In the book of Galatians, Paul admonishes his readers to permit themselves to be instructed from the law. He writes, “Tell me, you who desire to be under law [i.e., “you who would be justified by the law” (Galatians 5:4), which is contrary to the purpose of the law], do you not hear the law?” (Galatians 4:21).

Paul goes on to derive an important truth from a narrative taken from the Torah (verses 22–31). By calling upon the Galatians to listen to the law (or Torah), and by showing them how the law supports his teaching, Paul is acknowledging the perennial nature of the educative role of the law.

Paul further upholds this role of the law in his warnings against engaging in the “works of the flesh” (Galatians 5:19–21), all of which are condemned—either directly or in principle—by the law. To Paul, the works of the flesh violate the summation commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” which accords with “walking by the Spirit” (verses 14–18). If the standards of behavior set forth in the law were no longer valid, why does Paul cite a commandment directly from the law? Obviously, the apostle recognizes the perpetual nature of the educative role of the so-called “Old Testament” law.

But he also recognizes the judicial role of the law.

After pointing out that the inheritance given to Abraham (and to Abraham’s “offspring”) is based on promise, not law, Paul writes, “Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made...” (Galatians 3:19).

The law was “added” in the sense that it was given in codified form at Sinai in the time of Moses. Of course, this does not mean that the principles set forth in the law were previously unknown, or that murder, adultery, theft, lying, coveting, dishonoring parents, and so forth, were not sins before the law was received at Sinai. (See the section entitled “The Added Law” at the end of this brochure.)

The law was added “because of transgressions”—that is, to identify transgressions. As pointed out

above, the knowledge of sin has the effect of increasing awareness of one's own sinful nature and results in greater personal responsibility. Without the excuse of ignorance, sin becomes *exceedingly* sinful; transgressions are increased; a person becomes fully aware of his sinfulness and of his need for a Savior. When he repents of his transgressions and turns to God through faith in Christ (the "offspring") for forgiveness, his transgressions—not the law!—are blotted out. In this way, the law acts as our custodian *until* we come to Christ through faith.

Now, how does the justification of a sinner affect his relationship to the law?

Paul continues, "Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian" (Galatians 3:23–25).

Paul is speaking of the second function of the law—the judicial role. While we were sinners, without Christ in the world, the law acted as our custodian. It declared us sinners and demanded that we pay the penalty for sin. Sin, working through the law, became utterly sinful. We were made aware of our hopeless condition and of our need of a Savior, a Redeemer, who could deliver us from the power of the law. This is how the law acts as a custodian to bring us to Christ.

But once we arrive—once we are "in Christ"—the law can no longer identify and condemn us as transgressors. Its purpose is no longer to lead us to Christ, for we have already arrived. Therefore, for us, *the law is no longer a custodian*. That's what Paul means when he says, "But now that faith [in Christ] has come, we are no longer under a custodian."

However, it is extremely important to understand that the abolishment of the law's role as custodian for those who come to Christ does not result in the abolishment of the educative role of the law. God's holy law is still—and forever will be—a "lamp unto our feet" and "light unto our path." Even after we come to Christ, we continue to derive understanding and wisdom from the law, and we continue to obey its commandments, now relying upon the Holy Spirit to strengthen us in our weakness.

Dead to the Law

Paul uses an interesting analogy to describe the judicial role of the law. He explains that just as a woman whose husband has died "is discharged from the law concerning the husband" and is now free to marry another man, so we, having "died to the law," are free to "belong to another, to him that has been

raised from the dead..." (Romans 7:1–4).

Paul did not say that the law died; he said that *we* died to the law, meaning that the judicial demands of the law, which identified us as sinners and demanded the death penalty, were fulfilled through the substitutionary death of Christ. Now, having "died to the law through the body of Christ" (verse 4), having been "baptized into his death" (Romans 6:3), we belong to Christ "in order that we may bear fruit for God" (Romans 7:4).

Once we are "in Christ," we are "discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit" (verse 6).

The "old written code" refers to the judicial role of the law. For us—provided we are in Christ—the law can no longer identify and punish us as sinners, for our record of past sins has been blotted out. It is now our responsibility to serve "in the new life of the Spirit."

Serving in "the new life of the Spirit" means striving to no longer break God's law. As Paul says, "I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self" (Romans 7:22), and, "I, of myself serve the law of God with my mind..." (verse 25).

In Romans 6 and 7, Paul refers to both the educative and judicial roles of the law. The judicial role called for our death, which was fulfilled in Christ's substitutionary death; the educative role calls for our obedience, which is fulfilled through the new life in the Spirit.

In Christ, we are no longer under the law's power to identify and punish us as sinners, for God has provided a means whereby we have been set free from the law's judicial demands. That's what Paul means when he says, "You are not under the law but under grace" (verse 14).

Perhaps now we can understand why Paul associated the Ten Commandments with the "dispensation of death" (2 Corinthians 3:7). Until our record of sins was abolished through faith in Christ, the commandments identified us as sinners, and the law demanded our death. But now, being set free from sin, we "walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4), obeying God's law from the heart.

Now that the law's role as custodian has been abolished—now that we have been set free from the curse of the law—we can fully appreciate the law as God's glorious standard for living; as a wellspring of knowledge, wisdom, understanding; as a "lamp to our feet" and "light to our path."

Only now, having been set free from the bondage of sin, is the full glory of God's holy law revealed to us. Now we can *truly* sing, "Oh, how love I thy law!"

The “Added Law”

Many believe that the law “added because of transgressions” (Galatians 3:19) was the ceremonial/sacrificial law, which involved a tabernacle, or temple, an officiating priesthood, special rituals and ceremonies, and animal sacrifices. According to this view, the term *added* strictly means “came into existence.” This automatically rules out the Ten Commandments as part of the “added law” because the Ten Commandments were in force before the children of Israel came to Sinai.

Paul tells us that this law was added “because of transgressions.” It has been said that the existence of transgressions indicates that another law—the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments—must have been in existence before the law of Galatians 3:19 was added.

It has also been argued that the word *till* in “till the offspring should come” indicates that the added law exhausted its purpose and was abolished when the “offspring” (Christ) came. The added law could not be the Ten Commandments, this view asserts, because the New Testament affirms that the Ten Commandments remain in force for Christians.

While this view seems plausible, it has its problems. One problem is that “the law” in Paul’s epistles usually refers to the law *in general*. The apostle’s repeated references to “the law” in Galatians casts serious doubt upon the above “added law” theory.

In Galatians, Paul speaks of different *roles* of the law, not different *parts* of the law. The entire law *was* in fact “added” at Sinai. While one can easily prove that specific laws—laws against murder, idolatry, adultery, blasphemy, and so forth—were in force before the time of Moses, it is nevertheless true that the law that was given at Sinai had not previously existed *in precisely that form*. It was therefore “added”—it *came to be*—at Mount Sinai in the time of Moses.

Paul is telling his readers that the promise of inheritance given to Abraham preceded the giving of the law (Galatians 3:16–17). The promise came first; the law was added later. Paul’s point is that the inheritance is based on the promise, not on a law that came later.

In other passages, Paul speaks of the law in similar terms, and he is clearly not speaking of the ceremonial/sacrificial aspects of the law only. In the book of Romans, he speaks of a time when the “Law came in...” (5:20). The context shows that the law “came in” at some point between the time of Adam and the time of Christ. The law that

“came in” was the entire body of terms set forth in the Siniatic covenant.

The phrase “because of transgressions” means simply that the law made transgressions known. It identified sin, and (to its disobedient hearers) resulted in sin becoming “sinful beyond measure” (Romans 7:13). As Paul says, “Yet, if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin” (Romans 7:7).

The phrase “till the offspring should come” does not refer to the temporary nature of the ceremonial law; nor does it mean that the law as God’s standard of behavior, or code of ethics and morality (i.e., the educative role), would be rendered invalid once Christ had come. It simply means that the law’s role as a custodian (see accompanying article) ends where faith in Christ begins. The *transgressions* are abolished—not the law!

The ceremonial/sacrificial law was a part of the Law of Moses from the beginning. It was not added later. However, it should be noted that the sacrificial system did function as a disciplinary device. Therefore, when the law’s *role* as custodian ceases for those who have come to Christ, the disciplinary measures are no longer required.

Jeremiah 7:21–23 does not mean that the sacrificial law was later added to the terms of the covenant as a result of Israel’s sins, as some have thought. The passage reads:

“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: ‘Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices, and eat the flesh. For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this I commanded them, ‘Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you.’”

God *did* give the Israelites commands concerning sacrifices—even before they departed Egypt. What He means here is that He never commanded sacrifices *without moral responsibility*. God is not pleased with mere sacrifices. He is not like the pagan gods, who were thought to be appeased with a certain number of sacrificial offerings. To God, sacrifices without a heart of obedience are worthless (see Psalm 51:16–19). That’s why He tells Israel to treat both types of offerings (burnt offerings and sacrifices) the same: They are worthless to Him because the offerers do not have the heart of obedience that truly pleases God.

Is the Law a “Schoolmaster”?

Speaking of the role the law plays in bringing individuals to Christ, Paul uses the word *paidagogos*, from which “pedagogue” is derived. The term is translated “tutor” in the New American Standard Bible, “schoolmaster” in the King James Version, and “custodian” in the Revised Standard Version.

In the Greco-Roman world, the *paidagogos*, usually a slave, served as disciplinarian and guardian of his master’s children until they reached maturity. In Galatians, Paul is emphasizing the law’s role of identifying and punishing transgressions. Therefore, the term *paidagogos* is best translated “custodian.” “Schoolmaster” is an unfortunate translation.

Before we came to faith in Christ, Paul says, we were “confined under the law, kept under restraint...” (Galatians 3:23, RSV); “kept in custody under the law, being shut up...” (NASB); “imprisoned and guarded under the law...” (NRSV); “kept under the law, shut up...” (KJV); “held prisoners by the law, locked up...” (NIV). Paul’s description seems to reflect popular depictions of the *paidagogos* as a very harsh, sometimes cruel, disciplinarian. Being under the *paidagogos* is likened to being imprisoned.

Paul is not speaking of the ceremonial/sacrificial part of the law only; he has the *entirety* of the Sinaitic covenant in view. By identifying sin and re-

quiring punishment for the sinner, the law takes on the role of custodian. But once we come to faith in Christ, symbolized by a child reaching maturity, the law’s role as custodian ends. It can no longer identify our past sins or punish us as sinners because Christ has removed all guilt. We are no longer “kept in custody.”

Justification—being made righteous before God—can only be accomplished through faith in Christ. The Galatians were beginning to abandon this most important truth and were seeking justification by the law—or someone’s interpretation of the law. They were, in effect, reviving the law’s role as custodian. When Christ is abandoned, the record of sins reappears and the law once again issues the verdict of “Guilty!”

Paul warns against this wrong use of the law. He writes, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).

Warning! Seeking justification by the law (rather than through faith in Christ) is not the only way to revive the law’s role of identifying and punishing transgressions. Returning to a life of sin—the “works of the flesh”—will accomplish the same.

After listing the works of the flesh, Paul writes, “I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19–21).



All Scripture quotations were taken from the Revised Standard Version except as noted. Text by Vance A. Stinson.