

Paul Talks To Messianic Jews

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Introduction

“We are Jews by nature, and not sinners from among the Gentiles” (v. 15.)

Galatians 2:15-21 is addressed to Jewish believers and speaks in a context of Jews who believe in Yeshua. The context is that of Messianic Jews. Paul reports on a confrontation between himself and Peter in Antioch when the Jewish believers began to withdraw from table fellowship (i.e. the Lord’s Supper) because of the influence of some strongly observant Messianic Jews from Jerusalem. Paul opens his address to Peter with these words: “We are Jews by birth, and not sinful men from among the Gentiles.” These words set the framework of the words that follow, meaning that what he is about to say is intended for himself and other Jews who believe in Yeshua.

However what Paul says here directed to Jews is none the less influenced and affected by Gentile observers of the confrontation. Paul includes the words he addresses to the Jewish believers in an Epistle written to Gentiles in which he very much wants them to avoid the error of converting to Judaism. These sideliners are the reason why Paul emphasizes the commonalities that apply to both Jews and Gentiles. The presence of the Gentiles causes Paul to leave out a lot of things that he would have mentioned about Jewish observance if there were only Jews present. Certainly he does not want to display a lot of Torah observance before the Galatian readers of his epistle.

Christianity historically has totally ignored the differences in what Paul says to the Jewish believers and what he says to the Gentiles. Rather Christianity has taken it all as applied to all Christians with no distinction. Further Christianity has usually ignored the context and taken verses that were pleasing to them and interpreted them as applying to themselves. This is especially true about Galatians 2:20, which people memorized and meditated on, and gave sermons on, all completely ignoring the previous verse and what it says about the Torah or the fact that Paul addresses these words to Jewish believers.

There are four aspects of Messianic Judaism that Paul brings to his Jewish hearers in these verses from 16 to 21. The first of these aspects is the danger of legalism or “works of the Law” in contrast to faith in the Messiah. The second is Paul’s defense of Jewish Observance and his assertion that Torah observance is not rebuilding legalism. And the third is his explanation that the way of putting away sin and living righteous lives is by way of the Torah.

A. Faith in the Messiah vs. Works of the Torah.

“nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Torah but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the Torah; since by the works of the Torah shall no flesh be justified” (v. 16.)

Most people understand the phrase 'works of the Torah' as being the same as Torah observance, and thus they take Paul's use of this expression here and in Romans 3 as being a declaration against

Torah observance. This is not true as Paul himself was observant of the Torah. What Paul is teaching against is a legalistic approach to Torah Observance without faith. The expression "works of the Torah" occurs in a epistle discovered in Qumran cave 4. Scholars have named this document "Some Precepts [or Works] of the Torah" from the phrase found in the concluding remarks of the epistle. The contents of the epistle are injunctions for a strict form of legal Judaism, with special concerns for the right handling of sacrifices and the genealogical purity of the priesthood, and other halachic disputes. One example is a prohibition against offering up a pregnant cow. The Torah specifically prohibited slaughtering an animal and its offspring on the same day. The question was if a pregnant cow came under that proscription. Other sects in Judaism held that it was not. From this evidence in the Dead Sea Scrolls we can infer that the phrase 'works of the Torah' was a reference to legalistic observance of the Torah Mitzvot.

Legalism is a great danger to Jewish people. Even the Hebrew word for religion is an Aramaic word for Law. The word DAT occurs in Esther four times and refers to an edict or law. Most Jewish people regard Jewish observance as being law, and therefore binding and required as by law. They perform their worship without inner intention (Kavanah) even though our rabbis have given many injunctions as to worship and study with this inner intention (Kavanah). Some movements in Judaism teach that observance of Mitzvot in and of itself with out any intention or heart involvement brings reward. For example a Habad lady may give a person a few coins and hold out the contribution box for the person in order that he would put the coins in the box, just so that he would perform a mitzvah and thereby gain a reward.

The Prophets of Israel inveighed against legalistic observance of the Torah with out faith saying that while our people were bringing their offerings to the Temple their hearts were far away from the Lord and their deeds in every day life were abominable. I need only to mention Isaiah chapter 1. In verse 15 the Lord declares that when they would spread out their hands in prayer He would hide his face from them. The reason why is to be seen in verse 16 where the Lord calls on His people to wash themselves, make themselves clean, and remove the evil of their deeds from His sight. The problem was not that people failed to come to the Temple and pray and offer up their offerings. The problem was that they believed that the mere performance of the worship acts in and of themselves would gain for them the Lord's favor. This was "works of the Torah" without faith.

Paul emphasizes here the requirement of faith. The Pauline concept of faith is that of loyalty. It is not mere believing that something is true or real, but rather loyalty of the Messiah Yeshua. Paul inveighs against legalistic observance of Torah commandments without faith. He declares that this kind of observance which he calls "works of the Torah" can never bring a person to justification and salvation. Rather it is faith that is required in order to be saved.

Many Jewish people have a difficult time understanding this concept of "works of the Torah" or legalistic observance of Torah commandments, because Rabbinic Judaism is by its very nature legalistic for the most part. The very word for religion in Hebrew is DAT, an Aramaic word for law. Most of the Mishnah and the Gemarah have to do with the formulation of what is to be law in Israel, that is halachah among Jewish people where ever they are and whenever they live. As a result they like the Christians but for very different reasons identify Paul's statement against "works of the Torah" as being anti-Torah. But as we will see later on

in this very passage Paul is not inveighing against the Torah, but rather against observance without faith.

B. Justification in the Messiah does not allow for sinful violation of the Torah.

“But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be!” (17.)

Here we see the Apostle Paul addressing the question most probably put to him by his opponents, “If one is not justified by the works of the Torah then does that allow one to be a sinner?” Can we then just do away with the precepts of the Torah? The phrase in the verse above “minister of sin” can be understood to be an instrument leading to and promoting sin. Paul’s reaction is clear “May it never be!” or in Hebrew “HAS VeHALILAH!” Paul is not talking about putting away the Torah especially for Jews. Lawlessness is sin.

C. Jewish Observance is not Rebuilding Legalism.

“For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor” (v 18.)

Paul was an observant Jew. He certainly knew that, and probably his opponents knew it as well. He kept the holidays, participated in offerings, and made vows according to the Jewish Law. See Paul’s testimony of himself in Acts 22:3, and especially Acts 28:17. What Paul is saying here is that observance of the Torah is not “works of the Torah” which he argued against above in verse 16 and also in Romans 3:20,28. Being observant of the Torah is not rebuilding legalistic precepts that have nothing to do with being loyal to God and His Messiah. If by being observant of the Torah was in fact “works of the Torah” then Paul says that he would indeed be a transgressor. So in main Paul is arguing that Torah Observance is not legalism.

D. By Way of the Torah

“For through the Torah I died to the Torah, that I might live to God” (v. 19.)

Paul could never say to Gentiles that by way of the Torah they are to die to the Torah. The Torah was the covenant that God made with the People of Israel. Paul inveighed against Gentiles being circumcised because circumcision was an act of submission to the Mosaic Law, the Torah and conversion to Judaism. Thus it must be clear that Paul is talking about himself as a Jew and what he says about himself as a Jew applies to other Messianic Jews.

Here Paul describes the function of the Torah in the spiritual life of the Jewish believer. For the Jewish believer in Yeshua, the Torah is the means by which the deeds of the flesh are put to death. Later on in this epistle Paul describes ‘the deeds of the flesh’ which are:

Galatians 5:19-21 19 Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, 21 envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

According to Paul’s understanding of the Torah (he was a disciple of Gamliel a descendant of Hillel) the Torah puts an end to things which he describes here as deeds of the flesh. The ‘I’, the ego that Paul talks about is that part of human nature that tends towards violations of God’s Torah. This is the ‘I’ that is put

to death by observance of the Torah. Death is a word picture that Paul uses here and also in Romans to describe the end of one state and the beginning of another. The former state is that of a person who lives in sin and the latter state, after 'death', is one who is living in purity and holiness. The Torah points the way to holy and pure life.

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