

Salvation by Faith Alone: The Book of Romans

The Controversy

Lesson #2 for October 14, 2017

Scriptures: Leviticus 23; Matthew 19:17; Acts 15:1-29; Galatians 1:1-12; Hebrews 8:6; Revelation 12:17.

1. This lesson focuses on one of the basic issues in early Christianity and in the book of Romans: Should Gentiles be required to follow all the Jewish traditions and customs, including circumcision, before they are accepted as Christians? A number of former-Pharisees who had since become Christians (Acts 15:5) were very concerned that if Gentiles were allowed to become Christians too easily, the number of Gentiles in the Christian church would soon outweigh the number of Jewish Christians. They wanted Christianity to be a subset of Judaism.
2. Who were the Christians who had been Pharisees? Of course, we do not have a list of names. Who was the most important Pharisee who had become a Christian? Paul! But, we should remember that Simon who gave that feast in Jesus's honor on Friday night before the crucifixion was a Pharisee. It is quite likely that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus had also been Pharisees. They were related to Simon. (See *ST*, May 9, 1900, par. 15.) Joseph of Arimathea was a Pharisee. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. So, in Acts 15 we have one or more of the Pharisees arguing against another group of Pharisees.
3. Scan through sections of the book of Leviticus such as Leviticus 12, 16, and 23. In these chapters and in much of the rest of the book of Leviticus, one can discover multitudes of rules and laws on a variety of topics some of which seem very rational to us and some of which seem completely irrational. Many of those rules deal with specific worship practices connected with the sanctuary or tabernacle in the wilderness and later with the sanctuary in Jerusalem. For example, should Gentiles be required to travel to Jerusalem and practice certain ceremonial requirements? And most contentious of all was the question of circumcision. Some former-Pharisees who had become Christians believed that requiring adult male Gentiles to go through the rite of circumcision would prove whether those Gentiles were serious about their Christianity!
4. Read Acts 15. What was the purpose of those new rules that they agreed upon? The issue noted above raised so many arguments in the church at Antioch that Paul, Barnabas, and others decided it was necessary to take the matter to the church leaders in Jerusalem. Remember the story of Peter and Cornelius. (See Acts 10; compare Amos 9:10-12 where it was prophesied that "Gentiles will be coming to me.")
5. In the very early days of Christianity, virtually all of the converts were former-Jews. These new converts felt quite comfortable practicing the traditions and rules from the Old Testament which they had grown up with—including many rules that had been added through tradition and were not in the Old Testament. They did not see a conflict between practicing those Jewish rituals and being Christian. But, the new Gentile converts had not grown up with those customs and practices, and Paul had been teaching the Gentiles that it was not necessary for them to adopt those practices in order to become Christians. Fortunately, after a very detailed debate which took some time, (See Acts 15.) the church leaders in Jerusalem agreed that Gentiles could become Christians without being circumcised or following most of the other ceremonial requirements of the Old Testament.
6. Remember that the Jews who lived in Palestine were expected to travel to Jerusalem three times a year for the annual festivals, often staying there for two or more weeks at a time. They were expected to take sacrifices and offerings of various kinds. Each year in the fall,

they were expected to live in shelters or booths in the vicinity of Jerusalem for up to two weeks. A Gentile coming from Asia Minor (Turkey) or Greece or even Rome would have found it very difficult to participate in those ceremonies. So, how often would he be expected to go to Jerusalem and participate in some way in all those Jewish ceremonies? He would not have been allowed into the inner portions of the courtyard of the sanctuary itself and would have been regarded by the non-Christian Jews as unwelcome.

7. But, this raised another question: Were **any** of the rules or laws which were given in the Old Testament still obligatory for Christians? Even today? Are we required to keep the Ten Commandments in order to be saved? This set of issues was burning in the mind of Paul as he wrote the book of Romans and as he tried to keep peace in the new Christian churches.
8. Read Hebrews 8:6. This verse talks about a better priest, a better covenant or agreement, and better promises. In the times of the New Testament, instead of looking back at the requirements set forth in the Old Testament, the Christian church looked instead to the life, teachings, and death of Jesus as their model. Thus, the first question to be resolved in the minds of potential Christians was this one: Do you accept Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, the Son of the living God? (Acts 16:31) If you do accept Him, then you must come to the second question: How does or how should that impact your life? Paul seemed to be suggesting that keeping the commandments was to be the *result* of our relationship with Jesus Christ and not a *source* of salvation or a *requirement* for salvation. Why do you think it was that Paul—who was so highly educated about all those rules and ceremonies—was the one arguing against their keeping of the rules while many others with less education—like some of the disciples—were against setting aside those rules?
9. The real stickler for modern Christians and especially Seventh-day Adventists in this argument is the seventh-day Sabbath. While the Sabbath commandment is certainly part of the Ten Commandments given from Mount Sinai, to our Christian friends, it seems much more like one of the ceremonial requirements. While they can see logical reasons for observing the other nine commandments, they do not see a logical reason for observing the Sabbath. Thus, they regard strict Sabbath observers as legalists. So, we see that the basic issues troubling the early church are still present in our church today.
10. There are many verses in the New Testament suggesting that we should keep the commandments. (Matthew 5:17-18; 22:34-40; John 13:34-35; Revelation 12:17; 14:12) Do these verses refer specifically to the keeping of all of the Ten Commandments—or, to the entire writings of Moses, the Torah—thus, including the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath? Or, not?

God requires perfection of His children. His law is a transcript of His own character, and it is the standard of all character. This infinite standard is presented to all that there may be no mistake in regard to the kind of people whom God will have to compose His kingdom. The life of Christ on earth was a perfect expression of God's law, and when those who claim to be children of God become Christlike in character, they will be obedient to God's commandments. Then the Lord can trust them to be of the number who shall compose the family of heaven. Clothed in the glorious apparel of Christ's righteousness, they have a place at the King's feast. They have a right to join the blood-washed throng.—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons** 315.1.

11. Perhaps one way to put the issues in stark contrast is to read Acts 15 where the conclusion was: "The Holy Spirit and we have agreed not to put any other burden on you besides these necessary rules...." (Acts 15:28, *GNB*) By contrast, Acts 16:31 says that Paul told the

Philippian jailer and his family that one only needs to believe or have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and he will be saved.

Acts 16:31: They answered, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your family.”—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Acts 16:31). New York: American Bible Society.

12. Adventists of the 21st century have tried to walk a fine line between those contrasting views suggesting that the moral law has never been changed and is required of all peoples while the ceremonial restrictions pointing forward to the death of Christ are no longer required. Adventists assert that those who keep the Ten Commandments—including the Sabbath—are not legalists but are practicing righteousness by faith.
13. But, before we go too far down that pathway, we should consider the following words from Paul and from Ellen White:

Galatians 3:19-24: 19 What, then, was the purpose of the Law? It was **added** in order to show what wrongdoing is, and it was meant to last until the coming of Abraham’s descendant, to whom the promise was made....²³ But before the time for faith came, the Law kept us all locked up as prisoners until this coming faith should be revealed.²⁴ And so the Law was in charge of us until Christ came, in order that we might then be put right with God through faith.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Galatians 3:19–24). New York: American Bible Society. [Bold type and italic type are added.]

The Law protects us until we learn to do what is right. Consider the following.

He [God] did not even then trust His precepts to the memory of a people who were prone to forget His requirements, but wrote them upon tables of stone. He would remove from Israel all possibility of mingling heathen traditions with His holy precepts, or of confounding His requirements with human ordinances or customs. But He did not stop with giving them the precepts of the Decalogue. The people had shown themselves so easily led astray that He would leave no door of temptation unguarded. Moses was commanded to write, as God should bid him, judgments and laws giving minute instruction as to what was required. These directions relating to the duty of the people to God, to one another, and to the stranger were only the principles of the Ten Commandments amplified and given in a specific manner, that none need err. They were designed to guard the sacredness of the ten precepts engraved on the tables of stone.

If man had kept the law of God, as given to Adam after his fall, preserved by Noah, and observed by Abraham, there would have been no necessity for the ordinance of circumcision. And if the descendants of Abraham had kept the covenant, of which circumcision was a sign, they would never have been seduced into idolatry, nor would it have been necessary for them to suffer a life of bondage in Egypt; they would have kept God’s law in mind, and there would have been no necessity for it to be proclaimed from Sinai or engraved upon the tables of stone. And had the people practiced the principles of the Ten Commandments, there would have been no need of the additional directions given to Moses.—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets**

364.1-2.

I am asked concerning the law in Galatians. **What law is the schoolmaster to bring us to Christ? I answer: Both the ceremonial and the moral code of ten commandments.**—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, Book 1,* 233.1.

“The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:24). **In this scripture, the Holy Spirit through the apostle is speaking especially of the moral law** [the Ten Commandments].—*Ibid.* 234.5. [Content in brackets and bold type are added.]

14. **These passages suggest that all law including the moral law was added because we needed it. All law was an emergency measure.** This was one of the major crisis issues at the 1888 session of the General Conference. It is so easy for church members and organizations to focus on what people do rather than on who they are. Think of what is discussed at General Conference sessions of our church.
15. Those who have carefully studied the five books of Moses have divided the rules and laws mentioned there into five categories: 1) Moral law, 2) Ceremonial law, 3) Civil law, 4) Statutes and judgments, and 5) Health laws. If one looks through these laws and considers them carefully, it will be obvious that there is considerable overlap. It should also be obvious that in order for one to comply with many of these regulations: 1) He had to be able to go to the sanctuary in Jerusalem, 2) He had to live under a theocracy, and 3) He must be prepared to kill animals as a part of his religious worship. Would you be prepared to do that?
16. Christians of that time believed—and we believe—that the Messiah had come, lived, and died. In the strictest sense of the word, the theocracy disappeared when the Hebrews chose Saul as their first king, and certainly, when the last temple to exist was destroyed in A.D. 70 along with the rest of Jerusalem. That made the strict keeping of all the rules given long ago by Moses impossible. So, what are we supposed to do?
17. When asked about the law and which was the most important part of the law, Jesus replied: “Love for God” and “Love for your neighbor.” (Matthew 22:34-40; Deuteronomy 6:4; Leviticus 19:18) A pundit by the name of Ambrose Bierce defined a Christian as “One who believes that the New Testament is a divinely-inspired book admirably suited to the spiritual needs of his neighbor.” So, where does that leave us?
18. If Christians are saved by faith, should they act differently from worldlings? Should those differences in behavior be obvious?
19. Returning to the background for the writing of the book of Romans, it is easy to get hung up on the horns of a dilemma. Since the days of Martin Luther, many Christians have believed that we are saved by faith “alone.” But, like the former-Pharisees turned Christians in Paul’s day, modern Christians including Seventh-day Adventists have a long list of “dos and don’ts.” Is it possible that God once instructed His people to carry out all those rules, and then later, for some reason God changed His mind? “Israel’s majestic God does not lie or change his mind. He is not a human being—he does not change his mind.” (1 Samuel 15:29, *GNB*) The Pharisees—even the former-Pharisees who had become Christians—believed that keeping all those rules set them apart and made them superior to others. Many of those Pharisees-turned-Christians prided themselves on being different. Do we do the same?
20. Paul was at that meeting in Jerusalem which is described in Acts 15. He, along with the others, recognized that those requirements—avoiding sexual immorality, avoiding meat

offered to idols, avoiding eating meat from animals that had been strangled, and avoiding the eating of blood—would help to keep peace in the Christian congregations to which he ministered. Those rules really had nothing to do with salvation itself but simply were how former-Gentiles and former-Jews were to sit next to each other and get along at church!

21. A few years later when he was back in the field working among Gentiles, Paul made it very clear that eating food offered to idols was a matter of personal opinion and that those idols could not affect the food in any way! It was not a matter of salvation in any way! See Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8 & 10, especially 1 Corinthians 10:25.
22. Paul had carefully worked with church leadership during the conference in Jerusalem. However, when it came to the actual practice of those rules, Paul demonstrated that he believed that the logic of what is right trumped even the decisions of church leadership!
23. Paul had met these issues head on in the church of Galatia, (See especially Galatians 3.) and Paul wanted to make certain that this problem did not arise in the church in Rome. Paul even went so far as to suggest that the converted Gentiles who had previously done the terrible things described in Romans 1 were less sinful than the former-Jews described in Romans 2! Those former-Jews who had become Christians were more than ready to judge their fellow believers who had been Gentiles!
24. Read Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; and Jeremiah 4:4. These verses suggest that the real circumcision has something to do, not with the foreskin of an external organ, but with the mind and “heart” where we do our most involved thinking. What does it mean to be circumcised of heart?
25. Consider two possible scenarios: 1) A new Christian sees all the things that his church seems to require of him. He comes to understand that those things are required for salvation. He believes that he must pay tithe, keep the Sabbath, practice health reform, avoid alcohol and tobacco, and live a morally upright life, etc. in order to be saved. His Christianity consists of a long series of battles with the natural tendencies of the heart in order to try to do those things. He might even become exhausted and depressed!
2) After carefully studying his New Testament, a second Christian falls in love with Jesus because of what Jesus has done for him. His earnest desire is to understand God more fully and correctly and to follow Christ’s example as far as possible. He does this not because he believes he is required to do so but because he wants to be like his Lord. He may do all the same things that his friend in scenario #1 does; but, he does them for very different reasons. Does that matter? Which of these two do you believe more clearly understands the gospel? Could you tell by their external behavior the difference between the two?
26. Read Galatians 1:1-12. It should be clear, especially from Galatians 1:6-9, that Paul did not consider the issue of the gospel an inconsequential matter!

Galatians 1:6-9: ⁶ I am surprised at you! In no time at all you are deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ, and are accepting another gospel.

⁷Actually, there is no “other gospel”, but I say this because there are some people who are upsetting you and trying to change the gospel of Christ. ⁸But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel that is different from the one we preached to you, may he be condemned to hell!

⁹We have said it before, and now I say it again: if anyone preaches to you a gospel that is different from the one you accepted, may he be condemned to hell!—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Galatians 1:6-9). New York: American Bible Society.

27. But, if one continues reading in the book of Galatians through chapter 3, one will discover

that Paul clearly believed that the law had a continuing function for Christians. The law is to protect us, guide us, and to bring us to Christ. All of this leaves many people confused. There was a great deal of confusion over this question at the Seventh-day Adventist General Conference session of 1888.

28. In Paul's day, to a considerable extent, the issue was a matter of pride for Jewish Christians. They were very concerned that the Christian church would soon become a predominately Gentile church, and thus, it would lose its Jewish distinctiveness—and they were right!
29. Be honest now. Why is it so easy for many people to slip into legalism? How do we convince new converts to the Seventh-day Adventist Church of the importance of Sabbathkeeping, tithing, health reforming, etc. without appearing somewhat legalistic? Do we understand the truth of the gospel so clearly that we can spell those issues out without confusion when talking to new believers or even to those who have not yet become Christians? Or, do we lay unnecessary burdens on people when they become Christians?
30. To those who accept and seek to follow the larger-view, great-controversy, trust-healing model of the plan of salvation, these issues are core to our beliefs. We wish very much that Seventh-day Adventists around the world would understand the correct reasons for doing what they do and what the church recommends and do those things because they want to and not because they think they are required to. What is your motive for being a Christian and a Seventh-day Adventist?

All true obedience comes from the heart. It was heart work with Christ. And if we consent, He will so identify Himself with our thoughts and aims, so blend our hearts and minds into conformity to His will, that when obeying Him we shall be but carrying out our own impulses. The will, refined and sanctified, will find its highest delight in doing His service. When we know God as it is our privilege to know Him, our life will be a life of continual obedience. Through an appreciation of the character of Christ, through communion with God, sin will become hateful to us.—Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages** 668.3.

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