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What Is Meant by “the Works of the Law”?

What is the true Scriptural meaning of “the works of the law” in relationship to “justification by faith” and commandment keeping? Traditional Protestant teachings create tremendous problems in understanding the true meaning of critical Scriptures, claiming that when a person has been justified by faith, he or she does not have to keep the commandments of God, and those who keep God’s laws and commandments are seeking justification by “the works of the law.” They cite Romans 3:20-22, 28 as proof that one who has been “saved” is not required to keep the law. In the KJV these verses read: “Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets. Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference....Therefore, we conclude that a man is justified by faith, without the deeds of the law.”

The phrase “by the deeds [Greek *εργων* *ergon*, “works, deeds”] of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight,” coupled with the phrases “without the law” and “without the deeds [Greek *εργων* *ergon*, “works, deeds”] of the law,” gives the impression that law and commandment keeping is not required for salvation. Among those bolstering this theory, it is claimed that “the righteousness of God, which is by faith of Jesus Christ” means that justification is by faith without any works. Therefore, the commandments of God are no longer binding on those who believe in Jesus because “Christ is the end of the law” (Rom. 10:4).

The confusion created by these scriptural references is further compounded by what Paul wrote in Romans 2: “For not the hearers of the law *are* just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified” (Rom 2:13). How is it that “the doers of the law shall be justified,” when “the deeds of the law” do not justify?

Paul also wrote that the law is not abolished by faith; rather the law is established by faith: “Are we, then, abolishing law through faith? **MAY IT NEVER BE!** Rather, **we are establishing law**” (Rom. 3:31). Instead of doing away with the law, Paul reaffirmed what Jesus Christ taught concerning the law, when He said: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; **I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.** For truly I say to you, until the heaven and the earth shall pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no way pass from the Law until everything has been fulfilled” (Matt. 5:17-18). (*Please see Appendix E “How Did Jesus Fulfill the Law and the Prophets?”*)

The problems in understanding these scriptures, as well as the erroneous interpretation of Romans 3:20-22, began with inaccurate translations and assumptions. The incorrect English translation began with John Wycliffe’s 1380 translation from the Latin Vulgate. In modern English it reads: “For of the works of the law, each flesh shall not be justified before him, for by the law is the knowledge of sin, but now without the law, the righteousness of God is showed, this is witnessed of the law and the prophets and the righteousness of God is by the faith of Jesus Christ in to all men and on all men that believe in him” (Samuel Bagster, *The English Hexapla*, 1841).

William Tyndale’s 1534 translation is slightly different. However, his rendition also gives the strong impression that keeping the commandments and laws was not required: “Because that by the deeds of the law, shall no flesh be justified in the sight of God. For by the law comes the knowledge of sin. Now verily is the righteousness that comes of God declared **without the fulfilling of the law**, having witness yet of the law and of the Prophets.

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The righteousness no doubt which is good before God, comes by the faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all that believe” (William Tyndale’s Translation, Samuel Bagster, *The English Hexapla*, 1841; also see Tyndale’s New Testament, 1536).

Upon examination of these verses, it can be noted that Tyndale added three words, “the fulfilling of,” to the phrase “without the law,” making it read “without the fulfilling of the law.” Tyndale deviated too far from the Greek text by adding these extra words, and the resulting translation gives the impression that no one has to keep the law. However, while his translation seems to support the teaching that obedience to the laws and commandments of God is not necessary, Tyndale’s other writings show that he believed the exact opposite. Nevertheless, his translation further bolstered the Protestant belief that Christians were not required to keep the law. In fact, this misinterpretation has given rise to a “lawless grace” that is rampant in the church today and is absolutely contrary to the Word of God.

The correct translation from the Greek and the proper interpretation of these verses will reveal what Paul actually meant. But first, the following words and phrases must be defined: sin, law, the letter of the law, the works of the law, the spirit of the law, justification by faith and the righteousness of God.

Definition of Key Words and Phrases

Sin: What is sin? John wrote, “Whoever committeth sin transgresseth the law; for sin is the transgression of the law” (I John 3:4, *KJV*). A literal translation of this verse reads, “Everyone who practices sin is also practicing lawlessness, for sin is lawlessness.” Sin cuts a person off from God, and the wages of sin is death (Rom. 3:23). There are outward sins, which are observable and known by others, and there are inward sins, which are the hidden sins of the heart and mind. Many times a person committing an inward sin is not even aware of it. Moreover, no one knows the inner sins of another because no one can read the mind of another. However, since God is a heart-knowing God, He knows the hidden sins of the heart.

The apostle Paul wrote about the evils of human nature, that there is no one who is righteous—all are sinners: “For we have already charged both Jews and Gentiles—ALL—*with* being under sin, exactly as it is written: ‘**For there is not a righteous one—not even one!** There is not one who understands; there is not one who seeks after God. They have all gone out of the way; together they have *all* become depraved. There is not *even* one who is practicing kindness. No, there is not so much as one! Their throats *are* like an open grave; with their tongues they have used deceit; *the* venom of asps *is* under their lips; whose mouths are full of cursing and bitterness; their feet *are* swift to shed blood; destruction and misery *are* in their ways; and *the* way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.’ Now then, we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God” (Rom. 3:9-19).

Jesus revealed that sin originates within the heart and mind of man: “And He said, ‘That which springs forth from *within* a man, that defiles the man. For from within, out of the hearts of men, go forth evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickednesses, guile, licentiousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness; **all these evils go forth from within, and these defile a man**” (Mark 7:20-23).

The prophet Jeremiah said, “The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, and is desperately wicked: who can know it?” (Jer. 17:9). And again Paul stated, “The carnal mind *is* enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it *be*” (Rom. 8:7).

The Law: The term “the law” in the New Testament, in most cases, refers to the laws and commandments of God as found in the five books of Moses. But in some contexts “the law” refers to the covenant that God made with Israel. In the book of Hebrews, “the law” can also refer to the ritual laws of sacrifices that were offered at the temple in Jerusalem. In other cases, “law” refers to a specific law.

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The purpose of God’s law is to define sin. It gives the knowledge of what sin is, “for through *the law is the knowledge of sin*” (Rom. 3:20). If there were no law, there would be no sin. Furthermore, if there were no sin, there would be no need for forgiveness, no need for a Savior. This is what Paul meant when he wrote, “For the law works out wrath; because where no law is, *there is no transgression*” (Rom. 4:15). Those who transgress the law, or sin, are under the penalty of sin. The ultimate end of sin is death, for “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23).

The law defines sin. The law has no power to enforce or compel anyone to obey (Gal. 3:21). Even with the knowledge of the law, people sin (Rom. 7:7-25); consequently, all the world is under the law and guilty before God, whether acknowledged or not (Rom. 2:11-13; 3:19).

The Letter of the Law: From the beginning of the world, God has required all people to obey His laws and commandments in the letter of the law (Gen. 4:6-8). Later, in the days of Noah, because of sin and violence, God destroyed all life with the flood (Gen. 6:5-13). After the flood, God incorporated His laws and commandments into the covenant He made with Noah and His family (Gen. 8:20-22; 9:1-17). Later, He established His covenant with Abraham and his seed. Abraham believed God, and his faith was imputed to him as righteousness (Gen 15:4-6). When God transmitted the promises of the covenant He had established with Abraham to Isaac, God declared it was because of Abraham’s obedience: “And the LORD appeared unto him [Isaac], and said, Go not down into Egypt; dwell in the land which I shall tell thee of: sojourn in this land, and I will be with thee, and will bless thee; for unto thee, and unto thy seed, I will give all these countries, and I will perform the oath which I swore unto Abraham thy father; and I will make thy seed to multiply as the stars of heaven, and will give unto thy seed all these countries; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; **because that Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws**” (Gen. 26:2-5, *KJV*). God’s commandments, statutes and laws that Abraham was commended for keeping were the same ones that He later gave to the children of Israel at Mount Siani.

In God’s covenant with Israel, also known as the Old Covenant, the children of Israel were given a choice between life and death, blessing and cursing, dependent upon their adherence to His commandments and laws: “See, I have set before thee this day **life and good, and death and evil**; in that I command thee this day to love the LORD thy God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments and his statutes and his judgments, that thou mayest live and multiply: and the LORD thy God shall bless thee in the land whither thou goest to possess it.

“But if thine heart turn away, so that thou wilt not hear, but shalt be drawn away, and worship other gods, and serve them; I denounce unto you this day, that ye shall surely perish, *and that ye shall not prolong your days upon the land, whither thou passest over Jordan to go to possess it. I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live; that thou mayest love the LORD thy God, and that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him: for he is thy life, and the length of thy days: that thou mayest dwell in the land which the LORD swore unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them*” (Deut. 30:15-20, *KJV*).

In Deuteronomy 28, God listed the blessings for obedience and the curses for disobedience. He expected Israel to obey all His laws and commandments in the letter of the law. In return, they would receive the physical blessings of God. The covenant with Israel offered no promise of eternal life; that would not come until Jesus Christ. (In the Old Testament, God reveals that certain chosen ones, such as the patriarchs, prophets, and certain of the righteous kings of Israel and Judah, did receive the gift and promise of eternal life. They will be in the first resurrection when Jesus Christ returns.)

The Works of the Law: This phrase, “the works of the law,” is perhaps one of the most misunderstood phrases in the epistles of Paul. The confusion over the meaning of this

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phrase originates from an inaccurate translation of the Greek term, **εργων νομου** *ergon nomou* which literally means “works of law.” It does not mean “**the** works of **the** law.” In the KJV, as well as in other versions, translators have inserted two definite articles into this phrase that are not found in the Greek text. One definite article, “the,” has been inserted before the word “works” and the other before the word “law,” making it incorrectly read “**the** works of **the** law.” Translators felt that it was necessary to add the two definite articles to help clarify the meaning, because they thought that the phrase *ergon nomou* referred exclusively to the laws and commandments of God. Thereby, it has been assumed that keeping the commandments of God is not required because “**the** works of **the** law” do not justify anyone with God. While it is true that “works of law” can refer to the laws of God, Paul undoubtedly intended a far broader application of the phrase.

If the apostle Paul had intended the phrase to read “the works of the law,” he most certainly would have written it that way in Greek. In fact, there is one verse, and one verse only, where Paul actually did write the entire phrase “the work of the law,” when he wrote: “For when *the* Gentiles, which do not have *the* law, **practice by nature the things contained in the law**, these who do not have *the* law are a law unto themselves, who show **the work of the law** written in their own hearts, their consciences bearing witness, and their reasonings also, as they accuse or defend one another” (Rom 2:14-15).

The Greek phrase in verse 15 is **το εργον του νομου** *to ergon tou nomou* which, when translated into English reads, “the work of the law.” Here it is quite evident that Paul was indeed talking about the laws of God.

In seven other places where Paul used this term, he did not use the definite article. Rather, he wrote only the phrase **εργων νομου** *ergon nomou*, “works of law.” In all places where *ergon nomou* appears, it should be translated as “works of law” rather than “**the** works of **the** law.” Listed below are the seven additional places where Paul used the phrase **εργων νομου** *ergon nomou*, “works of law”:

1) Rom. 9: 31-32: “But Israel, although they followed after a law of righteousness, did not attain to a law of righteousness. Why? Because *they did not seek it* by faith, but by **works of law**; for they stumbled at the Stone of stumbling.”

2-4) Gal. 2:14-16: “But when I saw that they did not walk uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in the presence of them all, ‘If you, being a Jew, are living like the Gentiles, and not according to Judaism, why do you compel the Gentiles to judaize? We who are Jews by nature—and not sinners of *the* Gentiles—knowing that a man is not justified by **works of law**, but through *the* faith of Jesus Christ, we also have believed in Christ Jesus in order that we might be justified by *the* faith of Christ, and not by **works of law**; because by **works of law** shall no flesh be justified.’”

5) Gal. 3:2: “This only I desire to learn from you: did you receive the Spirit of God by **works of law**, or by *the* hearing of faith?”

6) Gal. 3:5: “Therefore *consider this*: He Who is supplying the Spirit to you, and Who is working deeds of power among you, *is He doing it* by **works of law** or by *the* hearing of faith?”

7) Gal. 3:10: “For as many as are *relying* on **works of law** are under a curse, because it is written, ‘Cursed *is* everyone who does not continue in all things that have been written in the book of the law to do them.’ ”

The True Meaning of “Works of Law”: It is evident in these verses that Paul is including the traditional laws of Judaism in the phrase “works of law.” In Galatians 2, Peter and the others were not following a law of God but were observing a traditional law of Judaism to eat separately from Gentiles. Peter knew better because fifteen years earlier, when God sent Peter to Cornelius’ house, Peter said to Cornelius, “You know that **it is unlawful for a man who is a Jew** to associate with or come near to anyone of another race. But God

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has shown me *that* no man should be called common or unclean” (Acts 10:28). Peter was talking about a law of Judaism—a man-made tradition. Therefore, Paul’s use of the phrase “works of law” includes all humanly devised religious, traditional laws of Judaism (Mark 7:1-13). It can also refer to Gentile religious rituals and the sacrifices that they offered to their gods (Acts 14:8-18).

In addition, the phrase “works of law” can include all the rituals and sacrifices under the Old Covenant. Paul wrote that it was impossible for those rituals and sacrifices to atone for sin before God the Father in heaven: “For the law, having *only* a shadow of the good things that are coming, *and* not the image of those things, with the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, is never able to make perfect those who come *to worship*. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered? For once those who worship had been purified, *they would* no longer be conscious of sin. On the contrary, in *offering* these *sacrifices* year by year, *there is* a remembrance of sins; because *it is* impossible *for the* blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:1-4).

In summary, “works of law” refers to the works of any law—the laws of God, the laws of Judaism, and the laws of pagan religions. Paul undoubtedly meant the broadest use of “works of law,” which includes all works of all religions.

The Spirit of the Law: Isaiah prophesied that Jesus Christ would magnify the law: “The LORD is well pleased for his righteousness’ sake; he will magnify the law, and make *it* honourable” (Isa. 42:21). The Hebrew word translated “magnify” is *gahdal* and means: “to advance, boast, exceed, to become, do, give, make, wax greater, increase, magnify” (Wigram, *Englishman’s Hebrew-Chaldee Concordance of the Old Testament*, 1980).

In all His teachings, Jesus Christ magnified the law and made it honorable, or spiritual. In His “Sermon on the Mount” Jesus repeatedly said, “You have heard that it was said to those *in ancient times* ... But I say to you ...” (Matt. 5-7). He declared and taught that the laws and commandments of God must be kept in “the spirit of the law.” In order to obey the spirit of the law, people need the Holy Spirit of God, and the laws and commandments of God need to be written in their hearts and minds (Heb. 10:16-17).

Concerning keeping the law in the spirit, Paul wrote, “... that we might serve in newness of *the* spirit, and not in *the* oldness of *the* letter ... the law *is* indeed holy, and the commandment holy and righteous and good ... For we know that the law is spiritual” (Rom. 7:6, 12, 14). In these verses, Paul is referring to the spiritual intent for keeping the commandments of God, known as “the spirit of the law.” True Christians will obey the laws and commandments of God in newness of the spirit. Not only will their obedience come from their hearts, but it will be manifest outwardly in their actions.

All of the Law and Prophets is based on love and is to be kept in the spirit of the law. This is what Jesus Christ meant when He answered the scribe’s question: “And one of the scribes who had come up *to Him*, after hearing them reasoning together *and* perceiving that He answered them well, asked Him, ‘Which is *the* first commandment of all?’ Then Jesus answered him, ‘*The* first of all the commandments *is*, “Hear, O Israel: *the* Lord our God is one Lord. And you shall love *the* Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” This *is the* first commandment. And *the* second *is* like this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’ Then the scribe said to Him, ‘Right, Master. You have spoken according to truth that God is one, and there is not another besides Him; and to love Him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love *one’s* neighbor as oneself, is more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.’ And Jesus, seeing that he answered with understanding, said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ And no one dared to question Him any more” (Mark 12:28-34). Matthew also recorded Jesus’ declaration regarding the commandments to love God and your neighbor as yourself, “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 22:40).

Jesus most emphatically taught commandment keeping based on loving God: “If you

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love Me, keep the commandments—namely, My commandments ... The one who has My commandments and is keeping them, that is the one who loves Me; and the one who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will manifest Myself to him ... If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him. The one who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word that you hear is not Mine, but the Father's, Who sent Me....As the Father has loved Me, I also have loved you; live in My love. If you keep My commandments, you shall live in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and live in His love" (John 14:15, 21, 23-24; 15:9-10).

The apostle John wrote that the commandments of God are not burdensome: "And by this *standard* we know that we know Him: if we keep His commandments. The one who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. On the other hand, *if* anyone is keeping His Word, truly in this one the love of God is being perfected. By this *means* we know that we are in Him....By this *standard* we know that we love the children of God: when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God: that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome" (I John 2:3-5; 5:2-3).

After a person has been converted, he or she is to walk in newness of life and do the "good works" of loving God and keeping His commandments. Commandment keeping in the spirit of the law keeps a person from sinning, because "by the law is the knowledge of sin."

Justification by Faith: When one is living in a state of sin, he or she is cut off from God. In order to be made right with God, the sinner must repent to God the Father and accept the sacrifice of the blood of Jesus Christ as full payment for his or her sins. God justifies the repentant sinner apart from commandment keeping. No one can be justified in the sight of God by any work of any law. Rather, justification is given to a believer based on faith. This state of justification is called the "gift of righteousness" which God the Father freely imputes to the believer (Rom. 5:17).

The function of the laws and commandments of God is to show men how to live, as well as to show them what sin is. No law can forgive sin. No law can give eternal life. That is not the function of law. Only God the Father can justify a person from sin through Jesus Christ's sacrifice and blood, which is separate from law and commandment keeping. However, justification of past sins does not do away with the law or the good works that God requires of true believers. This is what Paul meant when he wrote: "The hearers of the law *are* not just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified" (Rom. 2:13).

The Righteousness of God: The righteousness of God is shown by His grace in forgiving sin through the blood and sacrifice of Jesus. This righteousness places the forgiven sinner in right standing with God. Paul wrote: "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; *but* are **being justified freely by His grace** through the redemption that *is* in Christ Jesus; Whom God has openly manifested *to be* a propitiation through **faith in His blood**, in order to demonstrate **His righteousness**, in respect to the remission of the sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; *yes*, to publicly declare **His righteousness** in the present time, that He might be just, and the one Who justifies the one who *is* of *the* faith of Jesus" (Rom. 3:23-26). The righteousness of God that Paul wrote of is the expression of God's love, mercy, forgiveness and justification through Jesus Christ. In a sense, in this context, the word "justification" could be freely substituted for the word "righteousness," because the righteousness of God means the justification that He freely gives to the repentant sinner.

"Without the Law": The phrase "without the law" in the King James Version (Rom. 3:21) is another misunderstood phrase because "without" gives the impression that there is no law at all. In English, the word "without" conveys the meaning "the absence of." Therefore, some believe that those who become Christians no longer need to have any regard for the laws and commandments of God. However, in Romans 3:21, the English word

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“without” is an incorrect translation of the Greek word *χωρίς* *choris*. *Choris* means “separately, apart from, by itself, without” (Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 1974). The correct translation of *χωρίς* *choris* should be “**separate from law.**” Since the laws and commandments of God have not ceased to exist, the phrase “separate from law” is more precise, because it shows that the function of the law is separate from the function of justification by faith.

The Correct Translation of Romans 3:20-26

With a proper understanding of the words and phrases that the apostle Paul used, it is possible to render a more precise translation of Romans 3:20-26. The correct translation of these difficult Scriptures that Paul wrote makes them easier to understand: “Therefore, by **works of law** there shall no flesh be justified before Him; for through *the law is the* knowledge of sin. But now, *the righteousness* [justification] **of God that is separate from law** has been revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets; even *the righteousness* [justification] **of God that is through the faith of Jesus Christ**, toward all and upon all those who believe; for there is no difference. For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; **but are being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus**; Whom God has openly manifested *to be* a propitiation through faith in His blood, in order to demonstrate **His righteousness** [justification], **in respect to the remission of the sins that are past**, through the forbearance of God; *yes*, to publicly declare **His righteousness** [justification] in the present time, that He might be **just**, and the one Who **justifies the one who is of the faith of Jesus.**”

Forgiveness of sin and justification to God are only accomplished through the sacrifice and blood of Jesus Christ. These are gifts of God to the repentant sinner and cannot be earned by anyone’s works, as Paul wrote: “For by grace you have been **saved through faith**, and this *especially* is not of your own selves; *it is* the gift of God, **not of works**, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, **created in Christ Jesus unto the good works** that God ordained beforehand, in order that we might walk in them” (Eph. 2:8-10).

While no work of any law can bring spiritual justification, God the Father and Jesus Christ do require those who have the Spirit of God to obey His laws and commandments in the spirit of the law. Law keeping and justification by faith have two different purposes. Both are required for salvation.