

Did the Apostle Paul Teach A Righteousness *Without* Law-Keeping?

Can a Christian be justified apart from obedience to God's commandments?

One of the more troublesome passages for mainstream Christianity is found in the book of Romans: “Therefore **by the deeds** [works] **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” (Rom. 3:20-21, *KJV*).

This translation *seems* to indicate that there is no need to keep the laws of God, and that one can obtain righteousness “without the law”—that is, in the complete absence of law-keeping. But how can one who is living *outside of* or *without* God’s law also be righteous? Is that not a complete impossibility?

In order to determine the meaning of this difficult passage, we need to understand how Paul used the particular terms “law/the law” and “righteousness.”

Paul’s Use of “Law”: The word “law” is translated from the Greek *nomos*. Without the article it means “law” in general; an individual “law”; or the general principal of “law” or “a law.” When Paul uses the word “law” *with* the definite article—*ho nomos*—it means in the strictest sense the Pentateuch. In some cases it may refer to God’s covenant with Israel or to the Ten Commandments. In the book of Hebrews, “the law” can refer to ritual laws of the temple system. “The law” can also refer to a *specific* law other than “the law of God.” For example:

- Romans 7:23—“the law of my mind” and “the law of sin”
- Romans 8:2—“the law of the Spirit of life” and “the law of sin and death”
- Galatians 6:2—“the law of Christ”

“Law” Without the Definite Article: In more than half of the passages where Paul discusses “law,” he uses the term *without* the definite article—a fact critical to understanding his writings (*see endnote below*). This is especially true where Paul refers to laws of Judaism and decrees of men. Numerous problems in interpreting and understanding Paul’s epistles have resulted due to the *KJV* and other English translations *adding* the definite article “the” to nearly all of Paul’s writings where he uses “law” (*nomos*) *without* the definite article. Moreover, the translators failed to indicate their insertions by italicizing the added definite article—i.e., “*the*.” Thus, Christendom has developed many false doctrines based upon misunderstandings caused by these additions.

(Editor’s Note: In *The Holy Bible In Its Original Order—A Faithful Version*, when the definite article is *added* to *nomos*, it is always noted by italicizing the article—as in, “*the* law.” Thus, it is distinguished from *ho nomos*, where the definite article (*ho*) is actually translated from the Greek. In such cases the article is *not* italicized—“**the** law.”)

Paul’s Use of “Righteousness”: In the New Testament, “righteousness” is translated from the Greek *dikaisune*, which is used to bring out various aspects of “righteousness.” In Romans three, the phrase “righteousness of God” refers to God’s *justification* of one who is repentant. Such justification—which puts one in *right standing* with God—is based on *faith* and *belief* in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and His shed blood for the forgiveness of sins by grace (Rom. 2:14; 3:21-31; 4:2; 3:31; 5:1; Gal. 3:8-10; 5:4-5; Eph. 2:4-10).

The *KJV* Translators’ Great Error in Romans: In the book of Romans, the *KJV* translators *added* the definite article “the”—though it was not in the original text—when translating the Greek phrase *ergon nomou* into “**the** works of **the** law.” Also, they did not make the word “the” *italic* when writing “the works” or “the law” to show that it was their own addition. The correct translation, a “work of law,” is vastly different in meaning from “the works of the law.” Many

religions require “good works” in order for one to achieve salvation. These are a “work of law.” On the other hand, “the work of the law” is commandment-keeping (Rom. 2:14). Usually, Paul talks about a “work of law”—which is far broader than commandment-keeping, and included the traditional laws of Judaism which Christ condemned.

The Works of the Law: This phrase, “**the** works of **the** law” (*KJV*), is perhaps one of the most misunderstood phrases in the epistles of Paul. The confusion originates from an inaccurate translation of the Greek *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.” The definite articles were added to help clarify the meaning because translators *assumed* that *ergon nomou* referred exclusively to the laws and commandments of God. Consequently, it has been assumed that keeping the commandments of God is not required for salvation, because “**the** works of **the** law” cannot 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 *ergon nomou*.

If Paul had intended the phrase in Romans 3:20 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”: “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 in verse 15 is *to ergon tou nomou*, which reads “**the** work of **the** law.” Here it is evident that Paul was talking about *the* laws of God.

The True Meaning of “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.” Paul used *ergon nomou*—without the definite articles—in seven places, which should all be translated “works of law”: Rom. 9:31-32; Gal. 2:14-16 (three places); Gal. 3:2; Gal. 3:5; and Gal. 3:10.

It is evident in each of these passages that Paul is including the traditional laws of Judaism in the phrase “works of law.” In Galatians two, for example, Peter and the others were not following a *law of God* in eating separately from Gentiles, but were observing a *traditional law* of Judaism. Peter knew the Jews’ traditions because fifteen years earlier he 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...” (Acts 10:28). Peter was referring to a man-made *tradition* of Judaism. Here, in Galatians two, Paul refers three times to such laws as “works of law” (verse 16).

Paul’s use of the phrase “works of law” includes all humanly-devised religious decrees, traditional laws of Judaism (Mark 7:1-13), as well as the ritual and sacrificial laws followed by Gentiles in worshipping their gods (Acts 14:8-18). The phrase “works of law” can also include all the rituals and sacrifices under the Old Covenant (Heb. 10:1-4). Clearly, Paul used “works of law” in the broadest sense—which included *all* religious works of law.

Justification by Faith: When a person is living in a state of sin, he or she is cut off from God. Thus, the sinner is in a completely helpless condition—because no work of any kind or of any law can forgive sin and remove sin from his or her life. No one can justify himself from sin. It is impossible, even as the proverb declares, “**Who can say, ‘I have made my heart clean; I am pure from my sin’?**” (Prov. 20:9).

Only God, Who is the heart-knowing God and Lawgiver, can—through His mercy and steadfast love—forgive sins and transgressions of His laws and commandments. No man, minister, rabbi, priest or pope, or any other religious potentate, or any law or work of law can forgive sin, because all sin is against God. Therefore, only God Himself can personally forgive sin:

“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits; **Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases...** For as the heavens are high above the earth, so is His mercy toward those who fear Him. **As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us**” (Psa. 103:2-3, 11-12).

In order to be made right with God and have sins forgiven and removed, the sinner must genuinely repent to God the Father and accept the sacrifice of the blood of Jesus Christ as full payment for his or her sins. Notice how Paul expressed it: “[We, as called, true Christians, are] to the praise of the glory of His grace, wherein He has made us objects of His grace in the Beloved Son; **in Whom we have redemption through His blood, even the remission of sins, according to the riches of His grace**” (Eph. 1:6-7). In writing to the Colossians, Paul shows it is God the Father “Who has personally rescued us from the power of darkness and has transferred us unto the kingdom of the Son of His love; **in Whom we have redemption through His own blood, even the remission of sins...** And, having made peace through the blood of His cross, by Him to reconcile all things to Himself; by Him, whether the things on the earth, or the things in heaven. **For you were once alienated and enemies in your minds by wicked works; but now He has reconciled you in the body of His flesh through death**, to present you holy and unblamable and unimpeachable before Him; if indeed you continue in the faith grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which you have heard, and which was proclaimed in all the creation that is under heaven” (Col. 1:13-14, 20-23).

No one can be justified in the sight of God by *any* work of *any* law. Rather, justification is graciously granted to the believer based on repentance and faith in the sacrifice and shed blood of Jesus Christ. This *state* of justification is called the “gift of righteousness,” or the “gift of justification,” which God the Father freely imputes to the repentant believer (Rom. 5:17).

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 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.

Romans 3:20-31 Examined: In order to understand what Paul is saying in this critical passage in Romans three, we need to examine the context in which it was written. In so doing, we will come to realize that Paul is talking about how one receives justification by *faith*, as opposed to justification by a *work of a law*—whether by temple ritual or justification through a traditional law of Judaism. Clearly, Paul is not proclaiming the elimination of the laws and commandments of God as millions claim and believe.

Citing these verses, Evangelical Protestants make the claim that it is not necessary for a person to keep the commandments of God—especially the Sabbath and holy days—in order to have salvation. Moreover, they assert that if one keeps the law they are attempting to be *justified* by commandment-keeping rather than by the grace of God. What did Paul actually mean in Romans 3:20-31? Did he really advocate the elimination of the laws and commandments of God?

Again, in the *KJV*, Romans 3:20-21 reads: “Therefore **by the deeds [works] 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.” But can one really obtain righteousness “without the law”—that is, in the complete absence of law-keeping? How can one be righteous *without* law when the Bible specifically declares, “All Your commandments are righteousness”? (Psa. 119:172). Complicating matters even more, Romans 2:13 says, “The hearers of the law *are* not just before God, but the **doers of the law shall be justified.**” What is the answer?

The phrase “without the law” in the *KJV* gives the impression that there is no law at all. In English, “without” conveys “the absence of.” However, in Romans 3:21, “without” is an incorrect translation of the Greek *choris*, which means “separately, apart from, by itself, without” (Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 1974). The correct translation of *choris* is “**separate from**”—thus the phrase should read, “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 **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. The **operation of justification** is *separate from* commandments-keeping. Forgiveness and justification of one’s past sins can *only* come through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. **No law-keeping of any kind can accomplish that!** *This* is what Paul is writing about—he is not writing about the abolition of God’s law!

Here is the correct translation of Romans 3:20-31—showing that “the righteousness of God” is actually the *justification* of God through the operation of the forgiveness of sins:

“Therefore, by works of law there shall no flesh be justified before Him; for through *the law is the* knowledge of sin [which is the function of the law]. But now, **the righteousness of God** [justification] **that is separate from law has been revealed**, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets; even *the* righteousness 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 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.

“Therefore, where *is* boasting? It is excluded. Through what law? *The law* of works? By no means! Rather, *it is* through a law of faith. Consequently, **we reckon that a man is justified by faith, separate from works of law.** *Is He* the God of the Jews only? *Is He* not also *the God of the Gentiles*? YES! *He is* also God of *the Gentiles*, since *it is* indeed one God **Who will justify the circumcision by faith, and the uncircumcision through faith.**

“Are we, then, abolishing law through faith? MAY IT NEVER BE! Rather, we are establishing law [or making it to stand].”

Once a person has been justified of past sins through the righteousness of God as described by Paul—and one has received the Holy Spirit—then God begins to write His laws and commandments into his or her mind and heart, **thereby truly establishing the law**, not abolishing it. “For by one offering He has obtained eternal perfection *for* those who are sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after He had previously said, ‘This *is* the covenant that I will establish with them after those days,’ says *the Lord*: ‘**I will give My laws into their hearts, and I will inscribe them in their minds; and their sins and lawlessness I will not remember ever again**’ ” (Heb. 10:14-17).

Finally, 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).

Note: Below is a listing of the passages where Paul uses “law” and “the law” in his epistles.

1) There is *no* definite article in the Greek in these passages—simply *nomos*. If a definite article is *added*, it should be italicized—“*the* law.” Rom. 2:12, 14, 23, 25, 27; 3:20, 21, 27, 28, 31; 4:12, 14, 15; 5:13, 20; 6: 14, 15. In Rom. 7:1-6, all uses of “law/the law” are referring to the principal of “law” and the “law” of marriage as it pertains to God’s covenant with Israel. Rom. 7:7, 8, 9, 23, 25; 9:31, 32; 10:4; 13:10; I Cor. 9:9, 20; Gal. 2:16, 19, 21; 3:2, 5, 10, 11, 13, 18, 21, 23; 4:4, 5, 21; 5:4, 18, 23; 6:13; Phil. 3:5, 6, 9; I Tim. 1:9; Heb. 7:12, 16; 8:10; 9:19; 10:16

2) These passages already *include* the definite article as part of the original Greek—*ho nomos*. Thus they appear as “**the** law.” Rom. 2:13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 20, 23, 26, 27; 3:19, 21; 4:16; 7:12, 14, 16, 22, 23; 8:2, 3, 4, 7; 10:5; I Cor. 9:8, 9; 14:21, 34; 15:56; Gal. 3:10, 12, 13, 17, 19, 21, 24; 4:21; 5:3, 14; 6:2; I Tim. 1:8; Heb. 7:5, 19, 28; 8:4; 9:22; 10:1, 8