

# Seven Guidelines To Understand- ing Paul's Letters

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How should a disciple of Yeshua/Jesus view Paul's epistles? For those who desire to be faithful and to live "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God," seven guidelines are listed below. The Bible student should keep these guidelines in mind when reading Paul's writings.

## 1. OVER-ALL BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Paul's epistles, like any other part of Scripture, must be viewed in the light of the entire Bible. This means that when we are dealing with the Law, we must not focus on just a few statements Paul made, and ignore everything else the Bible says about God's Law. Paul's writings make up approximately 5% of the Bible. Paul's writings must be understood in a way that will make them compatible with what the other 95% of the Bible says. In other words, let the other 95% of the Bible interpret the 5% that Paul wrote.

It is important to remember that for many years, the Old Testament was the only Bible the Early Church had. The New Testament

writings were gradually accepted into the canon of the Scriptures. Therefore, when New Testament writers mention "the scriptures" or "the commandments," they are referring to the Old Testament.

## 2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*The New Jerusalem Bible*, in its "Introduction to Paul," makes this statement: "It is important to remember that Paul's letters were not meant as theological treatises: most of them represent his response to a particular situation in a particular church. . . . Paul's letters do not give any systematic and exhaustive exposition of his teachings; they presuppose the oral teaching which preceded them, and enlarge and comment only upon certain points of that."<sup>1</sup>

Because Paul often wrote to correct particular problems in particular churches, we must have some knowledge of the situation Paul was addressing if we are to correctly understand his writings. Sometimes the problem can be inferred from Paul's remarks, but often we are left with little or no knowledge of the situations with which Paul was dealing.

Theologians often try to reconstruct the historical backgrounds of the epistles, and make educated guesses about the problems Paul was addressing. This can be a noble effort, if it is done in a sincere attempt to come to a clearer understanding of what Paul taught. Unfortunately, many people come to an understanding of Paul that

contradicts what the rest of the Bible teaches, either by incorrectly reconstructing the historical background, or by ignoring it altogether.

### 3. PETER'S WARNING

It is important to bear in mind Peter's warning that Paul's letters are not easy to understand: "His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position" (2 Pet.3:16f).

Those with little or no knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures are especially apt to misinterpret Paul's writings to their own ruin. Notice, it is not the Law-keeping disciples of Yeshua who distort Paul's epistles — it is "lawless men" that Peter warns us about.

### 4. JESUS' WARNING

Early in His ministry, the Messiah spoke this warning to His followers: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments

and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt.5:17-19).

Our Master's warning seems plain and simple enough to understand, yet many Christians mistakenly believe that by fulfilling the Law, He thereby abolished it. But this is exactly what He is warning us *not* to think! "I have come to fulfill the Law," He says, "but do not even think that by fulfilling it, I am thereby abolishing it."

Sometimes it is easier for people outside Mainstream Christianity to see the blindness of Christians in this area. *The Jewish Encyclopedia* quotes Jesus' warning of Matt.5:17, and then makes this bold statement: "The rejection of the Law by Christianity, therefore, was a departure from its Christ."<sup>2</sup>

In an article with the catchy title "Jesus Was Not a Christian," the writer points out that "Jesus certainly wouldn't have been recognized as a Christian throughout his entire life." He "scrupulously adhered to the law of Moses" and "enjoined his disciples to keep every detail of the Torah."<sup>3</sup>

A story in the New York Yiddish *Forward* tells of a reporter's encounter with an old Hasidic Jew in Paris many years ago. This Jew had a fervent faith in Jesus as the Messiah. When the reporter asked him about the compatibility of Orthodox Judaism and belief in Jesus, the old man replied, "Who

then should believe in him — the gentiles?” The reporter describes the old man’s remarks this way: “He said that only Jews can truly accept belief in Jesus as the Messiah and regard him as the last prophet, for gentiles can never accept such a lofty faith. It is next to impossible for them to walk in his ways, for first of all, *Yeshua*, as he called him, commanded to observe all the Jewish laws, the entire Torah, and gentiles do not even know this.”<sup>4</sup>

Of course it is not impossible for Gentiles to accept and practice such a lofty faith. The question is, will they do it? Or will they continue to cling to the lies of the 2nd-century antinomian Marcion?

#### 5. PAUL'S POSITIVE STATEMENTS ABOUT THE LAW

Many Christians overlook or choose to ignore the positive things Paul said about the Law. He writes, for example, “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good” (Rom.7:12). Pauls says, “For in my inner being I delight in God’s law” and “I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law” (Rom.7:22,25).

He tells Timothy, “We know that the law is good if one uses it properly” (1 Tim.1:8). To the Corinthians he writes, “Keeping God’s commandments is what counts” (1 Cor.7:19). Even when explaining the righteousness that comes by faith, Paul is careful to make sure his readers know that their faith does not give them an excuse to

ignore God’s Law: “Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law” (Rom.3:31).

#### 6. PAUL'S NEGATIVE STATEMENTS ABOUT THE LAW

Paul, in his negative statements about the Law, was not criticizing the Law itself, but man’s misuse of the Law. The Law was meant to be a moral guide for a people already justified by faith, but some people in Paul’s day were depending on their Law-keeping as the means of their justification before God. What Paul criticized was not Law-keeping itself, but making Law-keeping the basis of one’s justification before God.

Between the Babylonian Captivity and the time of the Messiah, Israel developed an erroneous understanding of the Law’s purpose. The Jews who first returned from Babylon knew that their exile had been the result of the breaking of God’s laws; therefore, they put a heavy emphasis on the Law when they returned to their homeland. Unfortunately, this new emphasis eventually led to a theology that caused some people to erroneously view Law-keeping, rather than faith, as the key to their justification. Paul’s negative statements about the Law were simply his attempts to correct this erroneous use of the Law.

One writer puts it this way: “Paul, in his epistles, affirms the law, yet condemns the wrong emphasis men place upon it. In this

sense he is turning believers back to the original intent of the law, it being a rule for godly living for those who are already redeemed. He rejects the later shift towards making it a means of salvation."<sup>5</sup>

Another author says basically the same thing when he writes, "Paul rejects the law as a *method of salvation* but upholds it as a *standard for Christian conduct*."<sup>6</sup>

If we ignore this fact, we will twist the writings of Paul to our own loss, as Marcion and other lawless men have done throughout the centuries.

## 7. PAUL'S EXAMPLE

Actions speak louder than words, the well-known proverb says. If we truly want to understand Paul's attitude towards keeping or not keeping the Law, we must look at his actions as well as his words.

Even in Paul's own lifetime, false rumors were circulating that Paul taught people "to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs" (Acts 21:21). To dispel these false accusations, the elders of Jerusalem had Paul go to the Temple with four men who had taken a vow, telling Paul that in this way "all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law" (Acts 21:24).

To his Jewish accusers from Jerusalem, Paul said, "I have committed no offense either against

the Law of the Jews or against the temple" (Acts 25:8). To the Jews in Rome, he repeated the same testimony: "Brethren, though I had done nothing against our people, or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered prisoner into the hands of the Romans" (Acts 28:17).

It is very clear that Paul continued to keep the Law after he met the Messiah. The only thing that changed was Paul's reason for keeping the Law. Before, he had kept it in an effort to be justified before God. After meeting the Messiah, he found the justification he had sought through his Law-keeping. Paul was justified through faith, and the Law was internalized, "written upon the heart," as Jeremiah prophesied it would be (31:31-34). Now he desired to obey God's commandments because of the inward impulse of his new nature. His obedience was no longer the result of an external compulsion to justify himself before God by Law-keeping. Thus, he was free to obey "in the way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code" (Rom. 7:6).

By keeping the Law, in the right way and for the right reasons, Paul left an example for all disciples to follow, whether Jew or non-Jew. Some people seem to think that only Jewish believers were expected to continue practicing Torah. The so-called "Great Commission" rules out this possibility. When Jesus instructed His Jewish disciples to go to "all nations [Gen-

tiles],” He told them to teach the Gentile nations “to obey everything I have commanded you [My Jewish disciples]” (Matt.28:18ff). He commanded His Jewish disciples to obey the Torah (Matt.5:17-19 & 23:1-2), and they were to teach the Gentiles to do it.

The key to godly living is not to ignore the Law and elevate Paul, as Marcion did. Nor is the solution to overemphasize the Law and reject Paul, as the Ebionites and others did. The solution is to do what Paul said to do: “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Messiah” (1 Cor.11:1). If we truly follow Paul’s example, as he followed the example of Messiah, we will begin to practice Old Testament commands that the Church has ignored or changed.

A. W. Tozer wrote, “Probably no other portion of the Scriptures can compare with the Pauline epistles when it comes to making artificial saints.”<sup>7</sup> Let us avoid artificial sainthood by keeping in mind the above-mentioned seven guidelines for understanding Paul’s epistles.

As we let the naked truth of Holy Scripture renew our minds and change our thinking, the sunlight of God’s Word will dispel the mist of the ghost of Marcion. We will find ourselves transformed as the fog lifts, and as we see the Law as God always meant it to be seen: as something positive, holy, and good, “if one uses it properly” (1 Tim. 1:8).

Let those who wish to wholeheartedly follow the Messiah begin to learn the commandments,

practice them, and teach them to others, for “whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt.5:19). As we banish the ghost of Marcion, the “spirit of lawlessness,” from our theology, we will see the commandments not as a yoke of bondage, but as a moral guide by which we can joyfully live a life that is pleasing to the Heavenly Father.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>*The New Jerusalem Bible*, ed. Henry Wansbrough (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1985), p.1852f.

<sup>2</sup>*The Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Isidore Singer New York and London: Funk and Wagnalls, 1903), Vol.V., p.52.

<sup>3</sup>John Murray Smoot, “Jesus Was Not a Christian,” *A Way in the Wilderness*, ed. M.G. Einspruch (Baltimore: The Lederer Foundation, 1981), p.28.

<sup>4</sup>J. Feldman, “Yozel’s Hasid,” *The Ox, the Ass, the Oyster*, ed. Henry and Marie Einspruch (Baltimore: The Lederer Foundation, 1975), p.74.

<sup>5</sup>Michael Schiffman, “A Pauline Understanding of the Place of the Law for New Covenant Believers,” *The Messianic Outreach*, 7:3, Spring 1988, p.9.

<sup>6</sup>Bacchiocchi, Samuele *The Sabbath in the New Testament* (Berrien Springs, MI: University Printers, 1985), p.101.

<sup>7</sup>*Gems From Tozer* (England: Send the Light Trust, 1969), p.18.