



DECODING ROMANS – CHAPTER 3

What are the works of the law?

Introduction: The Divide Between Gentile and Jewish Believers

In the opening chapters of Romans, Paul addresses the divide between Gentile and Jewish believers, challenging long-held assumptions about identity, law, and judgment. The apostle moves through these topics with a keen understanding of the first-century Jewish and Gentile mindsets, revealing deep theological insights that are still relevant today.



Chapter One: Paul's Reproof of the Gentiles

In Chapter One, Paul calls out the Gentiles in Rome for their continued immersion in pagan practices, warning them that their behavior—marked by fornication, anger, and other vices—puts them at odds with God's moral

law. His message is clear: the Gentiles, though they may have lived outside of the Jewish covenant, cannot judge the Jews for their faith practices while simultaneously engaging in these immoral behaviors. Their sin is no less severe, and in fact, their rejection of God's revelation places them under judgment just as much as the Jews.

Chapter Two: Paul's Rebuke of the Jews

However, by Chapter Two, Paul pivots. He turns his attention to the Jewish believers, who held the assumption that their status as God's chosen people made them exempt from judgment. This false belief stemmed from their unique covenant with God, their possession of the Torah, and their long history as the people of Israel. But Paul, in no uncertain terms, dismantles this thinking. Despite their privileged position as recipients of God's revelation, Jews are still accountable to the same standard of righteousness as the Gentiles. They will be judged first because they know the law, but have failed to live according to it. For Paul,

the law is the great equalizer—the entire world is subject to the same divine law, and all have sinned.

The Role of the Law in Salvation: A Theological Dilemma

This brings us to one of the central theological issues Paul grapples with: the nature of the law and its role in salvation. In traditional Christian thought, especially within Western Christianity, the law has often been seen as something that Christ has “done away with,” leading to an anti-law perspective that can unintentionally foster a kind of anti-Semitic bias. But Paul’s message in Romans calls for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the law. It’s not that the law is obsolete, but that the law has always pointed beyond itself to a deeper purpose—the coming of the Messiah, Jesus, whose death and resurrection fulfill the law’s ultimate purpose: reconciliation with God.

Understanding the Torah: More Than Legalism

The concept of the Torah—often translated as “law”—is crucial here. The Hebrew word Torah means “instruction,” not just a set of legalistic rules. Torah encompasses God’s guidance on how to live in right relationship with Him and with others. The “Written Torah” includes not just the Ten Commandments, but the entire body of commandments in the Hebrew Scriptures, from the laws in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, to the ethical teachings found in the prophets



and wisdom literature. Yet, alongside the Written Torah, there existed the Oral Law, the rabbinic interpretations and teachings passed down through generations. These oral traditions were not considered as sacred as the written Scriptures, but over time, they became so ingrained in Jewish religious life that they began to be seen as equally authoritative.

The Tension Between the Written and Oral Law

In the first-century Jewish context, this dual system of law created tension. Some Jews were so focused on the Oral Law—the traditions and the “extra” regulations—that they lost sight of the Written Law, which Paul insists is the true guide to righteousness. The early believers in Jesus were encountering this confusion as Jewish Christians brought their

traditional interpretations into the fledgling church, sometimes leading to doctrinal errors and misunderstandings of the gospel.

Paul's Concern: Mixing Tradition with the Gospel

Paul's concern is that the early church would be led astray by a belief system that mixed true Scriptural teaching with man-made traditions. He warns that these extra teachings were nothing more than doctrines of men—doctrines that threatened to obscure the gospel of grace that he was proclaiming. The tension between the Torah and the Rabbinic Law is where much of Paul's letters find their focus—especially in his letters to the Galatians, Ephesians, and Romans.

The Analogy of the Plane: Torah vs. Messiah

To illustrate this, consider the analogy of a plane. For Jews in the first century, the Torah was like the aircraft they flew in—keeping them elevated above the "clouds" of Gentile paganism. But as they focused on the rules of the journey—adjusting their seats, checking the safety regulations, scrutinizing every little detail of the flight—they forgot the most important thing: the pilot. For Paul, that pilot was Yeshua (Jesus), the one who had fulfilled the law and who made the entire journey possible. The plane—the Torah—was not the source of their salvation; the Messiah was. But the Jews had become so focused on their "flight rules" that they had forgotten the purpose of their journey. Paul's rebuke to them is, "It's not about the rules. It's about the Messiah who fulfills the rules."

Justification and the Law: The Key Distinction

This brings us to an important distinction Paul makes between justification and the law. Many have misinterpreted Paul's writings as advocating for an anti-law stance—suggesting that the moral commandments of the Torah are no longer valid for Christians. However, Paul's message is not that the law is irrelevant, but that no one can be justified (made right with God) by the law. The law is holy and good, but it simply cannot save. The law defines what sin is, but no one can keep the law perfectly. Therefore, the law condemns all, but through Christ, there is a way out—a way that was always intended from the beginning.

Romans 3: Addressing the Misunderstanding of God's Justice

In Romans 3, Paul addresses this tension head-on. He anticipates a potential misunderstanding: if our unrighteousness shows God's righteousness more clearly, does that mean God is unjust in punishing us? This reasoning, though seemingly logical to some, is deeply flawed. Paul is quick to dismiss this idea, insisting that God's justice is not contingent on our faithfulness. His righteousness remains intact regardless of our actions,

and His judgments are always fair. God cannot be unjust, even if our sin highlights His holiness.

God's Unrevoked Promises to Israel

This section of Romans also touches on the important idea that God's promises to Israel have not been revoked. Just because some Jews reject Christ does not nullify God's faithfulness to His covenant with Israel. Paul's argument is that God is true to His word, even if humanity is not. The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable (Romans 11:29), and He will fulfill His promises to Israel, regardless of the faithlessness of some.



Implications for Modern Christians: The Law and Salvation

For modern Christians, this provides a critical lesson. While salvation is not earned through adherence to the law, the law still holds value as a means of understanding God's righteous standard. Paul's goal is not to

dismiss the law, but to clarify that justification—being made right with God—comes through faith in Christ alone, not through the works of the law.

Understanding the Law in Context

As we move forward in the book of Romans, Paul's argument will continue to unfold, laying the groundwork for the gospel of grace and its implications for both Jews and Gentiles. Through this study, we begin to see that understanding the law in its original context is essential for grasping the fullness of Paul's message. Far from advocating for an abandonment of God's commandments, Paul's letters seek to correct misunderstandings and point believers toward the true source of salvation—Yeshua the Messiah. This revelation has profound implications for how we understand righteousness, sin, and salvation today.

As we move forward in our analysis of Paul's letters, particularly in Romans 3, it becomes increasingly clear that Paul is addressing a crucial misunderstanding among both Jewish and Gentile believers in the early church. A misunderstanding that has echoed through Christian theology and into the modern age.

The Problem of Righteousness: Works vs. Faith

Paul's central argument is not that the law (God's Torah) is irrelevant to the believer, but that adherence to it—particularly the "works of the law," which refers to the man-made traditions or the halakhah of the elders—is insufficient for salvation. This is a significant point. In his time, the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders had emphasized that adherence to their oral traditions and interpretations was the path to righteousness. But Paul is adamantly rejecting that view.

*As he says in **Romans 3:20**: “Therefore, by the deeds of the law, no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.”*

What Paul is highlighting is the purpose of the law: to reveal sin, not to provide a means of salvation. This is a critical distinction. The law, according to Paul, functions as a mirror that reflects our sinfulness, showing us where we fall short of God's glory (Romans 3:23). But the law itself does not have the power to save. In fact, it condemns us all, because every one of us has broken it. And that's why, as we move into verse **21**, Paul introduces the “righteousness of God, apart from the law,” which is a radical new way of understanding salvation that came through faith in Jesus Christ.

The Role of Faith in Justification

In **Romans 3:22**, Paul emphasizes that “*the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe*” is available. This is a turning point for Paul. While the Jewish people once relied on their ability to uphold the Torah to justify themselves before God, Paul now introduces faith in Christ as the means by which one is justified or made righteous. This righteousness, as Paul explains, is not earned through keeping the law but is a gift from God through faith in Jesus Christ.



However, this doesn't mean the law is irrelevant or that it has no place in the believer's life. As we've seen earlier, Paul acknowledges that the law is still valuable, as it reveals sin and points to the need for a Savior. But for justification, it is the faith in Jesus Christ that is paramount. The believer is not justified by perfect adherence to the Torah or

by the traditions of men, but through faith in the Messiah, who fulfills the righteous requirement of the law on our behalf.

The Mercy Seat: The Propitiation of Christ

A key theological concept introduced here is that of **propitiation**, which Paul explains in **Romans 3:25**: “*whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith.*” The term “propitiation” has its roots in the **Hebrew word for mercy seat**, the lid of the Ark of the Covenant in the temple. This is a powerful image because in the Old Testament, the high



priest would sprinkle the blood of a sacrificial animal on the mercy seat to atone for the sins of the people. But Jesus Christ, as Paul argues, has now become that mercy seat. His blood, shed on the cross, is the ultimate atonement for sin, fulfilling what the Old Testament sacrifices foreshadowed.

This imagery underscores a significant shift in how humanity is reconciled to God. Whereas the law merely exposes sin and condemns, the mercy seat provides a way of escape. It's through Jesus' sacrifice that the believer can receive mercy instead of judgment, grace instead of condemnation. The law is not abolished but is fulfilled in Christ, who, through His sacrifice, enables us to stand justified before God.

A New Law: The Law of Faith

In **Romans 3:27**, Paul poses a critical question: “*Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith.*” This phrase, “the law of faith,” is key. While Paul is not advocating for lawlessness, he is introducing a new principle: justification comes not from the works of the law (the man-made traditions) but through faith in Christ. This is a foundational shift for both Jews and Gentiles. While the Jewish people had traditionally believed that righteousness came through the works of the law, Paul now declares that faith in Christ is the means of salvation for all people, regardless of their background or observance of the Torah.

This does not negate the importance of obedience to God's commands. In fact, as Paul writes in **Romans 2:13**, it is “*the doers of the law*” who will be justified. But Paul is clear: no one is justified by the law alone. If we try to rely on our ability to keep the law perfectly, we

will fall short, as all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. It's only through faith in Christ that we can stand righteous before God.

Universal Guilt and Need for Salvation

One of the themes Paul emphasizes throughout these chapters is that both Jews and Gentiles are in the same position before God—they are all guilty of sin. In **Romans 3:9**, he makes this point clear: *“What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin.”* No one is exempt from the judgment of God. As Paul will later say in **Romans 3:23**, *“For all have sinned and*



fallen short of the glory of God.” The Jews, despite their knowledge of the law, are no better off than the Gentiles. Both groups need a Savior, and that Savior is Jesus Christ.

This brings us to the core of Paul's argument: the righteousness of God is revealed not in our ability to keep the law but in His grace, which is

made available through faith in Jesus Christ. He concludes in **Romans 3:28** that *“a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.”* This is not a rejection of the law itself but a declaration that the law cannot save us. It is through faith in Christ alone that we can be justified, reconciled to God, and receive eternal life.

A Radical Reinterpretation of Righteousness

The message of Romans 3, when understood in its proper context, is revolutionary. Paul is confronting a deeply ingrained belief that righteousness is achieved by law-keeping. This was a powerful mindset, particularly for the Jewish audience, who had been entrusted with the law and the covenant. But Paul is saying that while the law is good and holy, it cannot save us. It merely points to our need for a Savior.

In the person of Jesus Christ, God has provided a way for all people—Jew and Gentile alike—to be made righteous, not by their works but through faith in Him. The law reveals sin, but only faith in Jesus can justify and save. And the hope for all believers lies in this: that through faith in Christ, we are given the mercy seat, the place where God's justice and mercy meet.

As we reflect on this profound truth, let us remember that salvation is not something we can earn or achieve through our own efforts. It is a gift of grace, freely given to all who place their trust in the righteousness of God, which is found only in Christ Jesus. And this is a

message that transcends time and culture—just as relevant today as it was in the first century.

Final Thoughts on Paul's Teaching: Upholding the Law, Not Abolishing It

Now, let's go back to the text and finish up the chapter. So Paul's message is very clear here—there is **no boasting**. He makes it emphatically clear that you cannot boast in the Torah, nor in the tradition of the elders. He sums up the argument with the conclusion that a man is justified apart from both. So then, he asks, *Is God the God of the Jews only, or is He also the God of the Gentiles?* Paul answers immediately: **He cannot be a god of one group and give them one set of rules, then give a separate set to the Gentiles.** No, that's not the way it works.

He uses a powerful reference from Exodus 12:49 to make his point: **"One law shall be for the native born and for the stranger who dwells among you."** This is a key moment in the Exodus story. As the Israelites came out of Egypt, there were Gentiles—Egyptians and others—who wanted to join Israel. They saw the truth and decided they'd rather be a part of God's people than stay in Egypt. Moses brought the issue to God, and God's response was clear: *If they want to be a part of My people, they must be circumcised and keep My commandments.* There's no division here—one law for all. This is the heart of the covenant: one people, one law, one nation. The same principle applies in modern contexts as well. Imagine living in a nation with two separate laws for different groups of people—it would be pure chaos.

Paul's Final Argument: The Law is Not Voided by Faith in Christ

Then, Paul brings everything full circle in this final section, addressing the lingering tension. He's been talking about how the Jew and Gentile will both face judgment under God's law, and how everyone, whether Jew or Gentile, is under the same standard. The issue at hand is whether Paul is against the law of God—whether he's teaching that the law, both written and oral, should be discarded in favor of Christ. He anticipates this accusation, because some will be thinking, *Paul, are you saying the law of God doesn't matter anymore? Are you against it?*

Paul addresses this head-on. His response is **crystal clear**: *Do we then make void the law through our faith in Christ? Certainly not.* The Greek phrase he uses here is even stronger: **"May it never be!"** This is Paul's way of saying, *Let you be cursed if you think that's what I'm saying!* Paul's message is the exact opposite of what some might be accusing him of teaching. He is not abolishing the law; in fact, **we establish the law** through faith in Christ. Christ didn't come to do away with the law; He came to fulfill it.

This is a pivotal point in Paul's argument. He's been misunderstood for so long—so much so that in Acts 20, he was falsely accused of teaching against the law. This accusation was serious enough that even James, the bishop of the early Messianic church, had to step in and say, *Paul, I know you're not against the Torah. You're just teaching against the works of the law, the tradition of the elders, not the Torah itself. But the people don't understand, and they need proof.* So Paul, being obedient, followed the necessary steps to demonstrate that he was, in fact, upholding the law.

The Torah as an Instruction Manual for Life

Paul's message is simple: **The Torah is an instruction manual for life.** It was for the first-century believers, and it is still valid today. The teachings of the Torah are not obsolete. They weren't replaced when Christ came—they were fulfilled. And that fulfillment doesn't nullify the law; it establishes it. The law still has value. It points us to God's righteousness and shows us how to live in a way that pleases Him. It's not about salvation through keeping the law, but about living in accordance with God's moral will.

Paul's emphasis on faith in Christ does not mean rejecting the Torah. It means understanding that **justification, being made right with God, does not come through works of the law**—whether those works are the written law, the oral law, or the traditions of men. No one can be justified by their efforts. The law shows us what sin is, but it cannot save us. Only faith in Christ does that. This is why Paul stresses that the law is **established** by faith, not nullified by it.

Tradition vs. Truth: The Battle for God's Law

And here's where the modern church needs to be careful. It's not that the law is irrelevant, but that tradition—whether from the first century or today—often obscures the true meaning of God's law. Many times, human traditions and doctrines replace the commandments of God. In the first century, these were the oral laws and the traditions of the elders. Today, we have our own set of traditions and doctrines—sometimes even unknowingly contradicting or sidelining God's commands.

This is a major point that Paul addresses throughout Romans: If you allow tradition to supersede God's law, you create a divide that leads people away from the truth. If we don't understand the law and its purpose, we can fall into the trap of disobedience without even realizing it. And when we disobey, even if it's out of ignorance, we miss out on God's blessings and, worse, bring curses into our lives.

A Call to Intellectual Honesty and Spiritual Integrity

At the end of the day, what Paul is calling for is **intellectual honesty** and a willingness to set aside personal biases and emotional attachments to traditions. He's urging us to look

at the text, let it speak for itself, and be open to the Holy Spirit's guidance in revealing the true meaning of God's word.

We live in a time where many of us are bound by **emotional traditions**—theologies and doctrines handed down through generations. Some of them may be good and true, but others may be man-made interpretations that distort the gospel. If we're going to serve God and truly love Him, we have to be open to the idea that some of our religious biases might need to be laid down.

Paul's argument in Romans is not just a theological discussion; it's a matter of **spiritual integrity**. By rejecting the traditions of men that obscure God's law, we open the door for God's blessings, and most importantly, for a deeper, more meaningful relationship with Him.

Conclusion: The Law is Not Abolished, But Fulfilled in Christ

In conclusion, Romans 3 is a powerful reminder that faith in Christ does not negate **the law**. In fact, it establishes it. The law still reveals God's standard of righteousness, and it's still relevant for our lives today. The tradition of the elders may cloud the true meaning of the law, but we must look beyond human traditions and embrace the law as it was meant to be—pointing us to Christ and showing us the path to righteousness. Let us not be deceived by doctrines of men, but instead, let the truth of God's word transform our lives, as we walk in the fullness of His grace and His law.

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