
Salvation Negatives, 3

“By the Works of the Law No Flesh Will Be Justified in His Sight”

“Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:19, 20).

One truth that was hard for some Jews (and us) to accept is the truth of the inadequacy of the Law to take away the guilt of sin. The Jews had kept the Law for many years; they had lived in it and trusted in it. They had come to see the Law as the embodiment of their salvation.

The Law had been in force since God gathered His people at Sinai and made them into His nation. The true Jew lived daily in the Law—by offering its sacrifices, attending its festivals, doing its rituals, and keeping its laws.

When Christ came and offered Himself as the promised sacrifice for sin, the Law—with all its different parts—was fulfilled. As Paul wrote to people who were Jews but had become Christians, he said,

For in Him [Jesus] all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority; and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed

the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him (Colossians 2:9–15).

By His death, Paul said, Jesus canceled the debt of sin which required people to keep the Law, which was impossible to keep perfectly. “He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross” (v. 14).

Unmistakably, Paul showed the Colossians that Jesus, not the Law, is the source of our salvation. Even though the Law dealt with sin in many ways, it was not given to Israel to take away their sin, to grant full forgiveness of their sin. The priests at the tabernacle and temple offered sacrifices daily, but those sacrifices could “never take away sins” (Hebrews 10:11b).

What, then, was the Law meant to be? What was its holy design?

The Law was a standard that convicted those who kept it of their sin. The Law reminded its adherents of their sin and their need for cleansing, but it was never designed to atone eternally for their sin.

Standards are effective at pointing out what perfection is. They say, “Here is the line. You must reach it. If you do not reach it, you will stand condemned.” However, standards do not offer any mercy for those who fail to live perfectly by them. All the Law could do was speak to those who were under it, telling them that

they had not kept it fully. Paul put it this way: “Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made” (Galatians 3:19). Did the Law conflict with what God was planning to do later? No, certainly not. It served as a prelude to what God would do through Christ. Paul said,

For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe (Galatians 3:21b, 22).

The Law was not given to save us; it was given to bring us to salvation.

The Law was written as divine guidance to keep alive the knowledge of God and His concern for His people. It did not provide salvation, but it pointed to the God who would watch over His people and one day give them the full sacrifice for sin. Paul wrote, “Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God” (Romans 3:19). The Law explained what God wanted His people to do in their religious exercises as the whole world waited for the appearance of His Son.

The Law was a schoolmaster that led to Christ. It was a tutor to bring the Jews to Christ. It was a good teacher, guide, or servant that pointed to the true plan that God had for our salvation. In Galatians, to young Christians who were being deceived by false teachers, Paul described it this way:

But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:23–28).

The Greek word from which “tutor” is translated points more to the household slave who accompanied the children to the school than to the actual teacher. This was the person who saw to it that the children were where they were supposed to be and that they received the instruction they needed. Paul said that the Law had such a purpose. It was not the means, the method of salvation. Rather, it brought us to salvation. It was the servant to our salvation, not the source of it.

The only person who could be saved by the Law was a person who kept it perfectly—and no one could. (Only Christ lived a perfect life.) Moreover, if one could perfectly keep the Law, his justification would come from his being just, not from the Law itself making him just. The Law provided guidance on how one should live in order to honor God before Christ came; but that Law could not atone for sin, or forgive sin. The Law was a standard, a code of conduct, a system of laws. Those laws served to convict people of sin, to keep the knowledge of God in their lives, and to bring those under it to Christ. Christ, in the fullness of time, came and offered Himself as the full and complete sacrifice for sin. Through that death, God established a new covenant with man, an agreement that included His everlasting promise: “For I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more” (Hebrews 8:12; see Jeremiah 31:34b).

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“For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near” (Hebrews 10:1).

“Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet” (Hebrews 10:11–13).