

## Works of Law

---

Justification—being declared “not guilty”—is not achieved through “the works of the law.” But what does that mean? And how *are* we justified, if not by works?

---

“*Knowing that a man is not justified by **the works of the law** but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by **the works of the law**; for by **the works of the law** no flesh shall be justified*” (Gal. 2:16).

“*For as many as are of **the works of the law** are under the curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them’*” (Gal. 3:10).



The reader will notice a phrase highlighted several times in the verses above: “the works of the law.” These works, Paul argues, cannot save us. Similar language is found in the epistle to the Romans (3:20, 28; 9:32). What are these works that cannot save us? And how can we be saved, if not by works?

Is Paul referring to *works of human invention*, that is, activities that we devise from our own ingenuity in hope of gaining God’s favor? That’s a problem, no doubt, as evidenced by the many pagan religions with their idols and bizarre rituals. But the context in both passages clearly points to a divine origin for this law. “The law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (Rom.

7:12). The degenerate religions of the pagans hardly lived up to that description. So that can’t be his topic.

A case can be made that these texts are addressing *the Law of Moses*. In both Romans and Galatians, Paul is writing to people who were under the influence of Jewish teachers promoting circumcision and various Mosaic regulations. Elsewhere we are told that salvation through the Law of Moses was not possible (Ac. 13:39; 15:5, 10), so reading these passages as addressing the deficiencies of the Law of Moses has some merit.

But are these “works of the law” referring *exclusively* to the Law of Moses? In the original language, definite articles are absent (literally, “works of law”). The lack of definite articles does not rule out the Law of Moses, but it does open the door to a wider application of Paul’s message. In fact, the curious wording in 3:10 provides a clue to a broader meaning. Paul speaks of those who “are of” the works of the law—not those who “obey” the law, or “perform” the law, but “are of” works of law. He is speaking of people who *base their justification on their ability to keep God’s law so well*. They are saved because they are so good. Paul pronounces a curse on those who take that approach, because (quoting Deut. 27:26) “cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.” Justification based on works of law is not possible, because nobody “does all things”—that is, nobody is sinlessly perfect.

Paul is not saying that we are not under law (we are: Gal. 6:2; 1 Cor. 9:21). Nor is he saying that obedience to God’s law is not important (it is: Gal. 3:1; Rom. 6:16). He is saying: Let’s not kid ourselves into thinking that our obedience is so impeccable, so clean, so precise, that we can stand before God on the day of judgment and claim salvation based on our performance. No matter how hard we try, we all stumble, we all make mistakes, we all fall short—we all are “under the curse.” *And that applies to any attempt to be saved through keeping the law of Christ, too.*

What recourse do we have, then? We are justified “by faith in Christ and not by [the] works of [the] law.” From hearts of faith, we do the best we can, looking to the blood of Jesus to redeem us from our flaws and failures. We are not saved by “faith only” nor “works only,” but by “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6).

— David King