

In the Law (Of Christ) but Not of the Law (Of Moses)
Acts 21:17-36

Main Idea: *Under the jurisdiction of Christ, believers are simultaneously free (from every religious/cultural obligation) and a servant (to every person) for the sake of the gospel.*

Introduction: Good morning! Please open your bibles to Acts 20. If you are new to the Bible, you can find Acts 20 following the gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John)...

Orienting the Text: Where we are in the story

Last week we followed Paul as he makes the last leg of his journey to Jerusalem. He makes two key stops – one at Tyre and the second at Caesarea at the home of Philip, the evangelist (whom we met back in Acts 8). In both cases, Paul is going to be warned about what awaits him in Jerusalem. In each case, it is the Spirit giving the warning through God’s people. And yet, Paul goes on to Jerusalem anyway.

Today, we come to Jerusalem at last, where Paul is asked to perform a ritual service in the temple for the sake of his reputation amongst his fellow Jewish Christians. He obliges, but then ends up being arrested in the temple courts. Some teachers argue that Paul made a category mistake in going to the temple – that he compromised his own principles regarding the Jewish law, and it cost him. Other skeptical scholars say that Luke made this up, and that the “real” Paul would have never agreed to any rituals called for by the Mosaic Law (we can safely disregard that statement).

Question: But did Paul cave into peer pressure and compromise and contradict the gospel by his actions? Or, once again, was there a deeper principle at work in his life that he models for us?

Many of you have probably heard the phrase that Christians are to be “in the world” but not “of the world.” Meaning we are free to participate in the worldly activities of the culture around us provided that the world doesn’t influence us or making us forsake Christ. But there are hot debates about how much cultural participation can a Christian do without forsaking their witness to Jesus or abandon biblical principles... Well, in Paul’s case, the question isn’t “in the world but not of the world” as much as it is “in the law” but not “of the law”. Was Paul still Jewish or not? Let’s open our bibles and explore together!

Exposition of Acts 21:17-36: In the Law but not of the Law

Paul meets with James and the elders - Acts 21:17-20a

Paul is welcomed by the Jerusalem leadership, and shares what God has been doing among the Gentiles, and they rejoice. The collection isn’t specifically mentioned so some scholars claim that the gesture was not well-received. However, based on how Luke describes their reception of Paul with such positive terms, it seems that his ministry was well received. For Luke as a historian, there is a larger issue looming regarding Paul’s reputation.

Paul is encouraged to prove he hasn’t abandoned the law - Acts 21:20b-26

As I have been mentioning, Paul had a lot of bad first century PR! There were lots of rumors, misinformation, half-truths and what-not about him, especially there in Jerusalem. Specifically, the issues were:

- A) Paul apostatized from the Law of Moses
- B) Paul was against circumcision
- C) Paul was against Jewish customs

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In other words, in becoming a Christian Paul became anti-Jewish, or as we would say today: anti-Semitic. Now, James doesn't seem to think that's the case, and so James wants to set the record straight for the Jewish church, and therefore he encourages Paul to accompany some young Jewish believers to the temple to fulfill their Nazarite vow and pay for their purification.

Some background here: According to Jewish law, if you wanted to thank or praise God for some kind of intervention and deliverance, you could make a "Nazarite" vow and shave your head and abstain from drink for a period of time. For them to finish their vow, and still offer sacrifices in the temple (thank-offering), they had to be ritually clean with washing. So, he agrees to do so. Why were they under a vow? My guess is that the Lord had worked a deliverance in the midst of persecution – maybe they were evangelists? – and in response took a Nazarite vow to thank God. This is a very appropriate Jewish way of worshipping and praising the Lord!

So, Paul agrees to do this as a way of showing his own appreciation for and honoring of Jewish customs and did not contradict his own faith in Christ. However, watch what happens next!

Paul is falsely accused and arrested in the temple-courts - Acts 21:27-36

Again, Paul did not do what he was accused of doing – while he associated with Gentiles and had likely brought Gentile believers with him back to Jerusalem with the offering, he didn't violate Jewish law by bring Gentiles into the temple courts. He was with the four guys under the vow! But, knowing that trouble was awaiting him in Jerusalem, here it begins. From this point on, the rest of the book of Acts will be the account of Paul moving throughout the Jewish/Roman penal system (Department of Corrections) as a political prisoner. In short, Paul's attempts to appease James and the Jerusalem elders was a total and complete failure... Or was it?

Question: Did Paul compromise on the gospel?

Some scholars and teachers argue that Paul made a major mistake here by compromising his own theology, his own message in trying to appease James and the other leaders in agreeing to go to the Temple and pay for the purification of these believers. Others say, the real Paul would never have done this and that Luke is fabricating the story in order to make Paul look good to Jewish readers of Acts. Others say that Paul is just being a straight-up hypocrite for doing what he did. So, did Paul compromise and contradict the gospel Jesus gave him by agreeing to do what James suggested? Maybe the better question is this: did Paul ever stop being Jewish after becoming a follower of Jesus? Let's try and answer this question from the book of Acts itself. Here are three statements reflecting the Paul we have in Acts:

- *Paul is a law-observant Jew who encounters Jesus, the true Messiah*
- *Therefore, Paul is no longer dependent on the Law for forgiveness/purity/belonging*
- *But, Paul observes the law insofar as it helps him focus on Christ*

We don't have time to unpack this, but I would argue that this is exactly what we find in Paul's letters. Insofar as the Law and his Jewish heritage assists his devotion to Jesus, Paul observes the law (vows, festivals, prayer, moral teaching of Torah about loving God/neighbor). In places where the Law is a hindrance to his devotion to Jesus (separation from Gentiles, insistence on circumcision for membership in God's family, needing sacrifices for atonement), Paul doesn't follow it. For Paul, that which the law, the prophets, the Temple were pointing towards is fulfilled in Jesus. Therefore, Paul remains Jewish, but a different kind of Jew.

Paul is a *Christ-apprehended Jew* - Philippians 3:12-15

So why did Paul agree to go the temple? Well, as a Christ-apprehended Jew, Paul belongs to a new Lord,

master, and a higher law than the Torah. He is under the law of Christ, and being under the law of Christ affords Paul a freedom and flexibility that allows him to minister and share the gospel in different cultural contexts. Put it this way: *Paul is “in the law of Christ”, but not “under the law of Moses”*

What does this mean? To flesh this out, we need some help from another one of Paul’s letters. I want you to turn to 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. We don’t have time to go into the full context of this passage, but the key issue here is whether or not Christians can eat meat sold in the marketplace that has been sacrificed to idols. How “free” are Christians to partake in what some consider to be idolatrous practices. In addressing this issue, Paul describes his approach to culture, broadly understood. Let’s take a careful look: ⁹ *For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.*

Paul’s posture – free, not obligated to or in need of any additional religious or cultural institution or ritual, but he becomes a slave to all, so that he may win them to Jesus. So, here is what that means for him: ²⁰ *To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.* ²¹ *To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.*

Notice two things here: Paul is not under the law but follows the law as he it enables him to reach others to Christ. Those outside the law, Paul says he is under the law of Christ.

The phrase “outside the law” is a-nomos (against or without law). The phrase Paul uses here is “en-nomos”, which literally means “in-law”. I think Paul is intentionally using this preposition “in”. One of the key features of Paul’s writing is the phrase “in Christ” (en-Christo). The only other place this word is used in the New Testament is in Acts 19, in reference to governing authority or jurisdiction. So, one scholar suggested what I think is the right translation: “I identified as one outside Mosaic jurisdiction with those outside it; not, of course, being outside God’s jurisdiction, *but inside Christ’s [jurisdiction]*” - BDAG

²² *To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.* ²³ *I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.*

Paul says, “I am in the *jurisdiction of Christ.*” Which means, his number one priority is following Christ and seeking to do what Jesus would do in any and every situation. In the case of his involvement with the Jerusalem church, I think several things are happening here: Paul demonstrates that he is not abandoning his Jewish identity or his appreciation for the Law, for it leads him to Christ. So with a clear conscience he can help these other brothers fulfill their vow to God, in Jesus name, and undergo ritual purity with the understanding that Jesus has made them pure. So you can bet that Paul is having conversations with them, encouraging them to keep their focus on him.

Again, why? He does it all for the sake of the gospel! That Christ may be seen by all. As one church father put it: “[Paul’s attitude] reflects his zeal for Christ and insatiable desire for the salvation of mankind.” – St. John Chrysostom

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Application: How do we engage culture in a Pauline way? Paul *accommodates* himself to all, so that all may hear his *uncompromised* message and *experience salvation* through Christ.

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Exposition of Acts 21:17-36: In the Law but not of the Law

Paul meets with James and the elders - Acts 21:17-20a

Paul proves he hasn't abandoned the law - Acts 21:20b-26

Paul is arrested in the Temple courts - Acts 21:27-36

Question: Did Paul compromise on the gospel?

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Application: How do we engage culture in a Pauline way?

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Questions for Small Groups:

- 1) Why did James want Paul to prove he was not against the Law?
- 2) Do you think Paul compromised the message of the gospel by going to the Temple? Why or why not?
- 3) What is the deeper principal Paul lives by in regards to the Law? (see 1 Cor. 9:19-21)
- 4) How is God calling you to “accommodate” yourself to someone else for the sake of them hearing the “uncompromised” message about Jesus?