

Grace Church
Roanoke, Virginia

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Lesson #52

ACTS
The Will of God in Concession
Acts 21:15-26

Today we expound a section of Scripture which just baffles the minds of Gentile Christians. It appears in this passage that Paul went back under the Mosaic Law for sanctification, and he does this with such ease that it seems as though deliverance from the Mosaic Law, for justification and sanctification, is irrelevant. However, this is only as it appears on the surface. Paul had a definite reason for going back under the Mosaic Law.

This section of Scripture should help us as Christians to understand why there are some Christians who believe that Christians are still under most, or at least some, aspects of the Mosaic Law, and others who believe that Christians are under no aspects of the Mosaic Law. Some Christians believe we are Saturday Sabbath keepers, others think we are Sunday Sabbath keepers and others think the Sabbath is not for today but Christians are Lord's Day keepers. Hopefully, this message will help us in our attitudes towards Christians who do not agree over the extent of Christian obligation to the Mosaic Law.

Paul is on the last lap of his third missionary journey and has moved out in obedience to go to Jerusalem. Friends and prophets, even Dr. Luke, tried to persuade Paul not to go to Jerusalem because there he would face suffering and imprisonment. Yet Paul would not budge for he knew this was the will of God for his life. He went ready to accept whatever God had for him in that great city of the Jews.

HASTENING TO JERUSALEM - Acts 21:15, 16

“And after these days we got ready and started on our way up to Jerusalem. And some of the disciples from Caesarea also came with us, taking us to Mnason of Cyprus, a disciple of long standing with whom we were to lodge.” -- Mnason was an “ancient” or “early” disciple. The King James Version says, “. . . an old disciple.” Mnason, now an old man, probably knew Christ in the flesh. He was alive at the time of the crucifixion, resurrection and Day of Pentecost. He was now an older man but he was still serving the Lord however he could. He opened his home and used his spiritual gift of hospitality. He was a man still true to the Lord and had accepted growing old graciously. Apparently he had not grown inflexible and critical as so many do in their latter years, for he was willing to accept Paul who many of the Jews called a libertine and a destroyer of the Law. Apparently Mnason was not afraid of change for he knew Paul's theology was radical. This man had enough graciousness and flexibility to be in the center of the Christian movement even in his latter days. He was able to adjust and to

be where the spiritual action was.

For those of us who are growing older, let us pray that we can be flexible, make adjustments, be willing to change and identify with what God is doing today. Let us pray that God will keep us from a critical and cynical attitude about life. Even as we grow older we must seek the will of God for our lives. God has a great need for older people. Their wisdom, prayer, hospitality, encouragement and often their finances are needed in the body of Christ. At every age a person must seek the will of God, submit to the will of God and do the will of God.

We must be careful that we are not like King Solomon whose devotion for the Lord waned in his older years. “For it came about when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been” (I Kings 11:4).

God used I Kings 11:4 in a mighty way in my own life some time ago. I was sitting in an apartment in Weisbaden, Germany reading my Bible. My eyes fell on this verse, and God spoke to me about my devotion to Christ as I had passed the forty mark. I found myself crying out, “Lord, don't let me grow cold to You as I grow old.” Tears streaming down my face, I cried out, “Lord, let me have true devotion to you in my latter years, and don't let me be negative, bitter, critical and hard as I move on in years.”

HEARTY RECEPTION - Acts 21:17, 18

“And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.” -- The leaders of the church at Jerusalem welcomed Paul and his companions. Apparently none of the original Twelve Apostles were in Jerusalem at this time. The leadership of the church at Jerusalem was left in the hands of James the less, the half-brother of Christ and the elders. The church at Jerusalem was ruled by a plurality of elders. James is pointed out as the leader of the elders.

HEARTENING REPORT - Acts 21:19

“And after he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.” -- Paul made a report but notice he did not talk about what he had done but what God had done. Paul was God's instrument and he was merely carrying out God's revealed will and directive will for his life. Paul was a vehicle also for carrying out the secret will of God.

HAPPY RESPONSE - Acts 21-20a

“And when they heard it they began glorifying God; . . .” -- The leaders in the church at Jerusalem were not jealous of what God was doing among the Gentiles through Paul. Whatever was said caused them to glory in God and not in a man.

HEEDING THE CRITICS - Acts 21:20b-22

“ . . . and they said to him, ‘You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law; and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. What, then, is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.’”

-- James and the elders of the Jerusalem church understood Paul's theology, realizing that he did not require Gentiles who trusted in Christ to keep the Mosaic Law nor did he encourage Christian Jews in Gentile lands to give up the Law. However, many of the rank and file Christians in Jerusalem did not see it that way. They heard (and it was hearsay) that Paul was telling the Jews in Gentile lands to give up keeping the Mosaic law--offering sacrifices, incense, oblations, festivals, Sabbaths, circumcision and other ceremonial and social requirements of the Mosaic Law. They wrongly concluded that Paul was an apostate from the Jewish religion.

James and the elders devised a plan so that the rank and file Jewish Christians would accept Paul as a true Christian who believed Jews should keep the Law.

Perhaps the Jewish church in Jerusalem had become too legalistic and gave too much place to the Law, never really weaning themselves from it. It seems strange that these Jewish Christians should be so “zealous for the Law.” But we who look back with two thousand years of church history behind us, must remember: 1) That these rites of the Jews had been appointed by God and the Jews were trained to observe them from childhood; 2) Apparently the Apostles themselves when in Jerusalem conformed to the ceremonial rites and did not set themselves violently against them; 3) The question of observances of the ceremonial aspects of the Law was only an issue among Gentiles who became Christians and not among Jews who became Christians in the Jewish cultural setting. It was mandatory for Jewish Christians to keep the Law; yet this law could not be imposed on Gentile Christians when there was no political government to enforce it. It should also be noted that God, in His secret will would see to it that Jerusalem, the temple and the sacrificial system would be destroyed in 70 A.D. by the Roman general, Titus. Until 70 A.D., Jewish Christians would keep the ceremonial aspects of the Law out of love for the Law and tradition.

The advice of the leaders given to Paul may not have been the best advice but Paul was not out of the will of God in taking a Nazarite vow. This advice was given to appease the critics of Paul among the common Jewish Christians. The leaders, fearing a division, accepted the philosophy of peace at any price. We will find out that the taking of the vow did not appease the critics for they were in sin for judging Paul, listening to hearsay and having a critical spirit. Critical people must deal with their sinful attitudes before God. Until they repent, they will never be appeased. Paul's critics were in the permissive will of God which is the place of frustration, disillusionment and divine discipline. The leaders of the church may have given Paul bad advice but they had not sinned. Whatever, God used all this to carry out the secret will of God in Paul's life.

HASTY DECISION - Acts 21:23-26

“Therefore do this that we tell you: We have four men who are under a vow; take them and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses in order that they may shave their heads; and 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. But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood, and from what is strangled and from fornication.’ Then Paul took the men, and the next day purifying himself along with them went into the temple, giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrifice was offered for each one of them.” -- Paul took a Nazarite vow (Num. 6). Any Jew could take a Nazarite vow and it was usually done to express gratitude to God for what He had done in some special instance. During the time of this vow (which may have been temporary or permanent), a Nazarite abstained from wine and strong drink, ate no grapes, came near no dead bodies, and refused to cut his hair. When the days of the vow were completed, he was to present an offering to God which consisted of two lambs, a ram, a basket of unleavened cakes and a libation of wine. The vow ended when the person shaved his head, burned his hair in the fire and offered the sacrifice. It took a good sum of money to buy two lambs and a ram, and many poor Jews did not have the money to buy these animals to offer in order to get out of the vow. However, it was permissible for a rich Jew to give money to buy these sacrificial animals for the poor Jews under a Nazarite vow.

Paul consented to take this vow for himself and pay the necessary fees for four other men who were taking the vow. Apparently Paul saved a little money for it was quite expensive to pay in order to end a Nazarite vow.

Many able Bible scholars feel that this was the worst mistake in Paul's whole ministry, for he, a preacher of grace, put himself back under the Law. This incident caused Campbell Morgan to say, “This was the greatest mistake in the ministry of the Apostle Paul.” A. C. Gaebeline says, “A strange sight to see him who taught deliverance from the Law submitting once more to the elementary things, as he calls them in his Epistle to the Galatians.” Donald Grey Barnhouse quite indignantly says, “The picture we have here of the Apostle Paul was an opinionated, stubborn old man. The idea of a blasphemous Paul offering sacrifices in the temple is just as ridiculous as if I were to go out into a Roman Catholic cathedral and accept the mass from a Roman Catholic priest.” For these men, Paul had removed himself from grace and put himself back under the Mosaic Law.

Was Paul in sin? Was he out of the will of God when he took this vow? My personal opinion is that he was not out of the will of God. We know from other Scripture that Paul often put himself back under the Mosaic Law in order to win men for Christ.

“And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the law, though not being myself under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law.

To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some” (I Cor. 9:20-22).

It was not uncommon for Paul to observe the Jewish ceremonial law with a clear conscience. He had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3); he observed the Days of Unleavened Bread (Acts 20:6); he wanted to get to Jerusalem to observe the Day of Pentecost (Acts 20:16); he also offered an offering in the temple (Acts 24:17). Lastly, it should be pointed out that Paul had taken a Nazarite vow on a previous occasion and he was not in sin then (Acts 18:18). Paul knew that he was saved by God's grace through faith in Christ and not by Law, but all unsaved Jews did not understand this, and in order to win them, he observed their rituals, customs and traditions.

Paul violently opposed going back under the Law for salvation but if, as a saved man, he could win a Jew, he would go back under the Law. When the issue of salvation and the gospel by grace came up, Paul was adamant. Remember how Paul refused to have Titus circumcised because it was an issue over grace/faith versus law/works in salvation, but he had Timothy circumcised in order not to offend the Jews.

The sum of the whole matter is this, that when the observance of the Jewish ceremonial law was urged as necessary to justification and acceptance with God, Paul resisted it; when it was demanded that its observance should be enjoined on the Gentiles, he opposed it; in all other cases he made no opposition to it, and was ready himself to comply with it, and will that others should also. (Albert Barnes, Acts)

“For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Rom. 10:4).

“Having cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross” (Col. 2:14).

“For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace” (Rom 6:14).

Paul declared himself free from the Mosaic Law, for he said in First Corinthians 9:20, “. . . though not being myself under the Law.” Paul was set free from the Law of Moses, but he was not free from the Law of God.

Paul, as a New Covenant Christian, was not under the Old Covenant of the Mosaic Law, but he was under the Law of Christ in the New Covenant. “. . . though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, . . .” (I Cor. 9:21). The law of Christ is governed and regulated on the principle of love not legalism.

“Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ” (6:2).

“Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET’ and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love therefore is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom. 13:8-10)

“For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF’” (Gal. 5:13, 14).

Paul was free from the Mosaic Law but not from law because he was under the Law of Christ which is a higher law than that of the Mosaic Law.

Paul, as a free man in Christ, keeping the liberating law of Christ! could voluntarily put himself back under the Mosaic Law as a matter of expediency to win Jewish brothers in Christ who did not understand grace in sanctification (Christian living).

As far as I can tell the Bible does not tell us that as New Covenant believers we are required to tithe, circumcise children or keep the Sabbath. However, if a Christian who understands he is saved by grace through faith in Christ wants to tithe, circumcise children or keep the Sabbath, he has the right to do so as long as he does not think these observances have anything to do with salvation or he does not require other Christians to observe them as a mark of spirituality.

The Law of Christ is a higher law than that of the Mosaic Law, but not all Christian brethren have learned this truth. For instance, many Christians observe the Sabbath on Saturday and others are Sunday Sabbath keepers, and they honestly believe that the Christian is to observe the Sabbath, making the Sabbath conform to Mosaic Law standards. Other Christians say no New Covenant Christian is a Sabbath keeper but is to honor the Lord’s Day, Sunday, as a day of worship. If a person wants to place himself under the Old Testament Sabbath principle, he is free to do so, although in my opinion he has missed the great blessing of grace under the Law of Christ. The Mosaic Law said, "Keep the Sabbath or you will be punished.” The Law of Christ says, “Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together as the manner of some is” (Heb. 10:25). Christians under the Law of Christ do not gather on the Lord’s Day out of pure obedience alone, but out of genuine love for Christ. The law of Christ reveals the depth of love one has for Christ and deals with the motivation of the heart. However, if a brother wants to observe worship on Saturday, or be a Christian Sunday Sabbath keeper, he has the freedom to do so, although he does not have to do so.

“Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom. 14:4-5).

Another case of putting oneself under the Mosaic Law is that of tithing; that is, giving 10 percent of one's money to the Lord's work. Nowhere does the New Testament specifically teach tithing for the Christian today. The Law of Christ seems to teach that a Christian is to give as the Lord has prospered him, "On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper, that no collections be made when I come" (1 Cor. 16:2), so that one motivated by love for Christ gives out of love for Christ and not on a legal principle per se. In the Mosaic Law, every Jew was required to give 10 percent twice a year which amounted to 20 percent. Every third year, the Jew was required to give 30 percent of his total earnings, the extra 10 percent was given to the poor. Under the Law of Christ, however, a man is commanded to give out of his pure love for Christ as he has been prospered. It may be that a man, under the Law of Christ, may only give five percent if that is all he has to give, but the Law of Christ is a higher law than the Mosaic Law and it may be that Christians ought to begin where the Old Testament leaves off, at least 10 percent and then more is given, not out of the motivation of obedience alone but out of pure love for Christ. However, if a person wants to place himself, as a free man, back under the Mosaic Law, he can, but he may well be missing the whole point of the Law of Christ.

In conclusion, it may be said that Paul was not out of the will of God in taking this vow but he may have gone too far in trying to please men.

CONCLUSION

Salvation in Christ is free and it sets a man or woman free. Salvation is not by any works, merits or acts a person can do. According to the Bible, a person cannot be saved by joining the local church, being baptized, by praying through, by partaking of the Lord's Table, by humanitarian works, by education, by culture, by reforming, but a person can be saved when the Holy Spirit sovereignly moves upon his life, convicting him of sin and drawing him to Christ, and he realizes his helplessness and hopeless spiritual state and reaches out to Christ by faith and receives Him as Lord and Savior.

Upon receiving Christ, a person becomes a free man in Christ and is under the liberating Law of Christ. Christ sets a person free, not to sin but to serve. He sets a person free, not to be sinless but to sin less. He sets a person free to experience the power of the Holy Spirit in guidance. A person who believes in Jesus Christ is saved by grace and lives by grace. He is truly a free man under the Law of Christ. Are you free? I'm not referring to political or social freedom but spiritual freedom. Has Christ set you free? Receive the Lord Jesus as Savior and you shall truly be liberated.