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MINISTRIES

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Setting the Record Straight: Paul and the Law of Moses (Acts 21:17-26)

Did the apostle Paul teach believers to abandon the Law of Moses? Many modern Christian teachers claim that he did. For instance, while citing Paul’s writings, popular megachurch pastor Andy Stanley claims that the Law has no relevance to Christians at all. In fact, he says Christians shouldn’t even keep the Ten Commandments:

Jesus followers are dead to the law. The law, along with the covenant arrangement that served as the context for the law, has no say in the life of a believer. None ... According to Paul, Jesus followers are dead to the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments have no authority over you. None. To be clear: Thou shalt not obey the Ten Commandments.

—Andy Stanley, *Irresistible: Reclaiming the New that Jesus Unleashed for the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 136

More recently, Christian teacher R. L. Solberg has echoed these radical sentiments from Andy Stanley and takes it a step further. He claims that following the Law of Moses is *incompatible* with following the Messiah and, in fact, hinders our relationship with the Messiah:

Does it make sense to follow Jesus *and* Moses? ... Well, the short answer is no. I don’t think that makes sense at all. In fact, it dilutes our devotion to Jesus and makes us double-minded in our pursuit of God.

—R. L. Solberg, “Why we cannot follow the Gospel of Jesus AND the Law of Moses at the same time,” April 27, 2023, YouTube.

So, some modern teachers are fully convinced that Paul’s teachings are opposed to the notion that Christians should obey God’s Law given through Moses. This idea that Paul taught Christians to abandon the Law of Moses is a popular rumor. What’s interesting is that these modern teachers are not the only ones who have believed this rumor. Some people in Paul’s own time also heard this rumor and thought that Paul taught against the Law. Apparently, this rumor has persisted for a long time! But is it true? Did Paul really teach Christians to abandon the Law of Moses? Well, why don’t we consider how

Paul himself directly addressed this rumor? Let's take a look.

Paul Sets the Record Straight

In Acts 21, Paul visits James in Jerusalem. It should be noted that the events described in Acts 21 are widely considered to have occurred after Paul wrote Galatians (Craig Keener, *Galatians: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 6-13).

But in any case, when Paul arrives in Jerusalem, James shares some exciting news with him. He tells Paul that there are “thousands” of Jews who have come to believe in Jesus—or Yeshua, as he was called in the first century! James also remarks that these Jewish believers in Yeshua are all “zealous for the law.”

Acts 21:20

“You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law.”

So, decades after the Messiah's resurrection, thousands of Jewish Christians were zealous for the Law. For these Christians, keeping the Law of Moses continued to be an important part of living out their faith in Messiah. This is significant and certainly not what we would expect if the apostles taught that Yeshua's work on the cross had made the Law irrelevant. But perhaps even more significant is what this passage teaches us about *Paul's* view of the Law. James goes on to inform Paul that the Jerusalem Christians have heard a rumor that he taught against the Law of Moses:

Acts 21:21

and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.

So, the rumor that Paul taught believers to abandon the Law of Moses was spreading among the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. If this rumor were true, like some modern teachers would have you believe, this moment would have been a great time for Paul to confirm it. If Paul really taught that followers of Jesus are no longer required to keep the Mosaic Law, we would expect him to have admitted it when directly confronted with such a claim. What we would *not* expect is for Paul to *dispute* this rumor. And yet, that is precisely what he goes on to do, as we will see.

James instructs Paul to join others in a vow and to participate in public worship at the Jerusalem temple. According to James, doing these things will refute the rumor that Paul taught believers to abandon the Law and will demonstrate that Paul himself kept the Law:

Acts 21:22-24

What then is to be done? They [that is, those believers who heard the rumor that Paul taught against the Law] will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. **Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law.**

The vow prescribed in this passage fits the description of a Nazarite Vow, a special kind of vow that was prescribed in the Law of Moses, and which required giving an offering at the temple (Numbers 6:1-21). James explicitly states that the purpose of Paul taking this vow is to refute the rumor that he taught

believers to abandon the Law of Moses.

Again, if the rumor were true—if Paul taught against Christians keeping the Law—we would expect Paul not to go along with James’s request. If keeping the Law really hindered a Christian’s relationship with the Messiah, then surely Paul would correct James’s terrible error. But that is not what happens. Let’s see:

Acts 21:26

Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.

Here, we see that Paul went along with James’s instruction. He took part in a vow and participated in temple worship to reassure the Jerusalem Christians that he lived “*in observance of the law*” (Acts 21:24). So, instead of confirming the rumor that he taught believers to forsake Moses, Paul took significant steps here to *dispel* that rumor.

Why did Paul make such an effort to demonstrate that he did not teach Christians to abandon the Law of Moses? The simplest explanation is that Paul did not believe that Christians should abandon the Law of Moses! Paul was setting the record straight. Dr. David Rudolph explains the significance of Paul’s actions:

Acts 21:17-26 is not simply an example of Paul participating in ritual purity and paying for sacrifices. Paul’s actions were intended to *set the record straight* concerning his way of life with respect to the law of Moses. His statement of clarification was made in the temple courts, before myriads of strict Torah-observant Jews who understood the meaning of his actions.

—David J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 57

While this explanation goes against what some modern teachers would have you believe, it takes the biblical text at face value and does not require us to bring any prior assumptions to the text. All we have to do is read it: people heard that Paul taught believers to abandon the Law; James tells Paul to participate in a vow and temple worship to disprove that rumor; Paul participates in a vow and temple worship. It would seem that Paul followed James’s instruction because he wanted people to know that he did not teach against the Law.

Did Paul Deceive the Jerusalem Christians?

Despite the straightforward reading of the text, some try to suggest that Paul was merely putting on an act to appease the Jerusalem Christians. That is to say, Paul’s actions gave the Jerusalem Christians false assurance that he affirmed the Law, when in reality, he didn’t. Some have tried to make this argument on the basis of Paul’s evangelistic strategy described in 1 Corinthians 9. Here is Solberg making this argument:

Paul himself, for the sake of the Gospel, became all things to all men. He says in 1 Corinthians 9:20, “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.” And he did. We see that in Acts 21. Paul had no problem taking those four men under a vow and

purifying himself along with them and paying their expenses. To his contemporaries, Paul *looked* like a practicing Jew, even though he was a firm believer in the Gospel of Jesus.

—R. L. Solberg, “Galatians (Part 6) – Gal. 5:1-26 – An Apologetics Bible Study,” May 21, 2023, YouTube.

Was Paul insincere in his efforts? Was his intention to trick the Jerusalem Christians into thinking that he did not teach believers to forsake Moses, even though he actually *did* teach believers to forsake Moses? Aside from this being a very strange and unethical thing for Paul to do, where do we find support for such an idea in the passage itself? Nothing in the text indicates that Paul was attempting to create a false impression. One has to approach the text *already assuming* such an idea. Again, the text itself leads one to conclude that Paul’s actions were intended to debunk the rumor that he taught believers to abandon the Law of Moses:

Acts 21:24

take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. **Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law.**

Furthermore, the idea that Paul was just putting on a show is not consistent with the rest of the Book of Acts. After this event in Acts 21, on three separate occasions, Paul declares that he lived in accordance with the Law of Moses when confronted with accusations that he didn’t:

Acts 24:14-17

But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, **believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets**, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man. Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation **and to present offerings.**

Acts 25:8

Paul argued in his defense, “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense.”

Acts 28:17

After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they had gathered, he said to them, “Brothers, **though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers**, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans.”

This consistent depiction of Paul affirming his commitment to the Law of Moses holds significance within Luke’s narrative in Acts. As Rudolph writes:

From a narrative point of view, each of these confirmations point back to Acts 21:17–26. One may ask what more Luke could have included in his narrative to express that Paul was a Torah-observant Jew. Acts is replete with statements that describe Paul as faithful to Jewish law and custom; **statements to the contrary are consistently identified as false rumours.**

—David J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 57

So, those who want to say that Paul actually *did* teach that believers were not required to follow God's Law need to explain not just Acts 21 but also these other passages. Where is the textual evidence that Paul is being insincere in any of these instances? Isn't it more reasonable to take Paul at his word? Isn't it more reasonable to say that the rumor about Paul was not true, which is exactly what James and Paul were trying to demonstrate in Acts 21?

Another problem is that, if Paul were simply trying to trick the Jerusalem Christians about his true teachings, the Jerusalem Christians would have soon found out about it. What then? Paul's efforts would be completely undermined. As Rudolph writes:

Paul would have certainly known that the Jerusalem community would continue to receive reports about his life and teachings after he left Jerusalem. Is it likely that Paul publicly set the record straight that he remained a Torah-observant Jew but that he gave no thought to the fact that his testimony would shortly thereafter be contradicted by his actions? Was Paul so facile?

—David J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 69

Since there is nothing in the Book of Acts that lends support to the idea that Paul was just pretending to be Torah observant in Acts 21, some have tried to find support for this idea elsewhere. As we noted earlier, they say that Paul explains this evangelistic strategy in 1 Corinthians 9:20.

1 Corinthians 9:20

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.

Drawing from this passage, it is argued that Paul kept the Law only when it was useful to “win” others. He didn't keep the Law out of sincerity or conviction, but simply so he could appease Jews and have opportunity to preach to them, and Acts 21 is an example of him doing just that. But what evidence do we have to confirm that the evangelistic strategy described in 1 Corinthians 9 is being implemented in Acts 21? Such a notion is, once again, *just assumed*. Also, there would be no reason to do this in Acts 21. The Jews in Acts 21 are already followers of the Messiah. Paul does not need to try to “win” them to the gospel. They've already been won!

It should also be noted that the idea that Paul kept the Law *only* in the company of Jews and abandoned it in other situations is a misreading of his evangelistic strategy in 1 Corinthians 9. When Paul says that he is not personally “under the law,” he does not mean to convey that he is not personally obedient to the Law. While the phrase “under the law” is often interpreted as meaning “obedient to the law,” that is not what the phrase means in this verse. The context makes this clear since, earlier in the same chapter, Paul appeals to the Law of Moses as authoritative and applicable to his readers:

1 Corinthians 9:8-9

Do I say these things on human authority? Does not **the Law** say the same? For it is written in the **Law of Moses**, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.”

It wouldn't make sense for Paul to appeal to the Law as authoritative for his readers only to say that he doesn't consider the Law authoritative in his own life just a few verses later. Not only that, but in the verse immediately following Paul's statement that he is not personally under the law, he emphasizes that he is not “outside the law of God”:

1 Corinthians 9:21

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.

The Bible and other Jewish writings consistently use the phrase “Law of God” in reference to the Law of Moses (Joshua 24:26; Ezra 7:12, 14, 21, 25; Nehemiah 8:8, 18; 10:29-30; Psalm 36:31; 30:9; Hosea 4:6; Sirach 41:8; Baruch 4:12; 1 Esdras 8:19, 21, 23-24; 3 Maccabees 7:10, 12; 2 Esdras 7:20; 4 Maccabees 13:22; Josephus, *Antiquities* 11.121, 124, 130). Also, Paul himself uses the phrase “Law of God” to describe the Law of Moses in other passages (Romans 7:22, 25; 8:7). All the evidence indicates that the Law of God and the Law of Moses are the same thing. Thus, when Paul states that he does not go “outside the Law of God,” he means that he does not violate the Law of Moses when ministering to those who are “outside the law”—that is, to those who are sinners. Paul does not violate the Law of God when ministering to sinners but remains under the “law of Christ.” The law of Christ is not something different from the Law of Moses, but rather refers to Christ’s “halakhah”—that is, his *interpretation* of the Law of Moses, specifically reflected in Christ’s loving interaction with sinners. As Rudolph writes:

Contextually, Paul’s use of ἐννομος Χριστοῦ (“in the law of Christ”) in 1 Cor 9:21b would seem to represent the law of Moses in the hand of Christ as iterated in Christ’s association with sinners.

—David J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23*, 2nd Ed. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 170

The scholar J. Brian Tucker echoes this perspective:

Paul has come to follow a lenient halakhah with regard to the gentiles, based on the paradigmatic model of Christ, who ate with sinners but remained Torah-observant (Matt 5:17-20; Luke 10:8; Phil 2:5-8). Being under Christ’s law was a lenient halakhah that formed the social identity of the early Christ-movement.

—J. Brian Tucker, *“Remain in Your Calling”: Paul and the Continuation of Social Identities in 1 Corinthians* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 112

So, the text of 1 Corinthians itself presents Paul as one who follows the Law of Moses as interpreted by Christ. Like Christ, Paul eats with sinners but does not violate the Law. What, then, does Paul mean when he says, “**To those under the law I became as one under the law**”? If Paul is already obedient to the Law of Moses, what is he trying to convey with this statement? Just as the phrase “law of Christ” refers to Christ’s interpretation of the Law of Moses, the phrase “under the law,” in this context, should also be understood in terms of halakhah or *interpretation* of the Law.

Scholars J. Brian Tucker, David Rudolph, and others, explain that “under the law” here refers to the Pharisees’ strict interpretation of the Law, specifically in regard to “table-fellowship.” (See David J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23*, 2nd Ed. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016); J. Brian Tucker, *“Remain in Your Calling”: Paul and the Continuation of Social Identities in 1 Corinthians* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011)). Table-fellowship refers to shared meals with particular customs and standards of ritual purity, and these traditions often differed among various groups, with some groups having stricter standards than others. The notion that Paul is accommodating different standards of table-fellowship in 1 Corinthians 9 is derived from the broader context of 1 Corinthians, which largely addresses controversies surrounding shared meals (1

Corinthians 8; 10:27-28; 11:33-34).

So, when Paul says he becomes as one “under the law,” he is expressing his willingness to abide by the Pharisees’ strict *interpretations* of the Law during table-fellowship, even though he personally doesn’t hold to the Pharisees’ standards.

For example, the Pharisees avoided not just foods that were prohibited by God’s Law but also some foods that were *permitted* by God’s Law. They considered biblically-clean meat “defiled” or “common” if it was purchased from a Gentile, even though the Law does not prohibit eating meat purchased from a Gentile (See E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990), 279-280.). The Pharisees’ strict interpretations developed into extrabiblical rituals, which Scripture calls the “tradition of the elders” (Matthew 15:1-2). Josephus confirms that the Pharisees “have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the laws of Moses” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.297). For instance, the Pharisees enforced extrabiblical hand-washing rituals before shared meals (Mark 7:1-5) and generally avoided eating any meat sold in the Gentile marketplaces (Romans 14:2; cf. 1 Corinthians 8).

Paul did not agree with the Pharisees’ rules, but for the sake of the Gospel, he accommodated them. That means he would not eat anything that would cause them to stumble (Romans 14:21), even though eating lambchops purchased from a Gentile butcher does not violate God’s Law. He may have even ritually washed his hands before shared meals. In any case, that is more likely what Paul means to convey when he says he “became as one under the law.” He means that he accommodated Pharisaic tradition when eating with them. As Tucker writes:

Lightfoot and Bockmuehl have suggested another reading for ὑπὸ νόμον [“under the law”], one that refers either to those holding to a more “strict interpretation of the law” or more specifically to the “Pharisees.” This view is preferred for the following reasons: First, in Phil 3:5, Paul says of himself, κατὰ νόμον Φαρισαῖος “as to the law, a Pharisee.” This makes for a good conceptual parallel to the language of 1 Cor 9:20. Second, Pharisees were known for a more strict observance of the law compared to the halakhah of Jesus. Third, this understanding distinguishes the small group from the previously mentioned larger group, i.e., “the Jews.” This distinction between the Pharisees and the rest of the Jews is furthermore evident in Mark 7:3 (“the Pharisees and all the Jews”) and Luke 7:29-30, as well as Josephus *JW* 1.110. So this proposed understanding of ὑπὸ νόμον as “those following a [strict interpretation] of the law” would suggest that Paul no longer follows the Pharisee sect; however, it could also indicate, as suggested by Rudolph, that he may adjust his approach to table-fellowship, when necessary.

Thus, this phrase should not be taken to preclude a Torah-observant Paul. First Corinthians 9:20 can plausibly be read as Paul’s interaction with diverse expressions of Judaism rather than as a rejection of his own Jewish identity with regard to Torah observance. So, in answer to the questions raised by the presence of ὑπὸ νόμον in 9:20, Paul uses the group descriptor, “those under the law,” to designate those living under a strict halakhic interpretation of the Pharisees. How does Paul become “as one under the law”? He does this by sharing table-fellowship with those who hold to these strict standards, and he, himself, follows them on those occasions. What does he mean when he claims he is “not under the law”? Paul is no longer following the strict halakhot of the Pharisees.

—J. Brian Tucker, “*Remain in Your Calling*”: *Paul and the Continuation of Social Identities in 1 Corinthians* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 103-104

So, when Paul says he becomes as one under the law, he is saying that he adapts to the Pharisees’

traditions when fellowshiping and eating with them. Paul does not personally adhere to these traditions, which is why he says that he is not personally “under the law.” However, Paul accommodated “those under the law” so as not to put an obstacle in the way of the gospel. That is to say, Paul would abide by the Pharisees’ *interpretations* of the Law, including their extra-biblical traditions, even though he personally did not abide by their rules in regular life.

For whatever it is worth, we look at 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 in greater detail in our teaching [What is the Law of Christ? \(Galatians 6:2; 1 Corinthians 9:21\)](#). We would also recommend our teaching [Matters of Opinion \(Romans 14\)](#).

The bottom line is, first, there is no textual evidence that Paul is merely trying to appease the Jews in Acts 21. Such a notion is just assumed and read into the text, but the text itself gives no indication of this idea. Second, the very idea that Paul kept the Law *only* for the purpose of appeasing Jews is a misreading of 1 Corinthians 9. The evidence within 1 Corinthians 9 itself demonstrates that Paul kept the Law all the time and believed that it was authoritative and applicable to his readers. In 1 Corinthians 9:20, Paul becoming as one “under the law” likely means that he accommodated Pharisaic tradition during shared meals. Thus, it is clear that Paul’s evangelistic strategy described in 1 Corinthians 9 is not applicable to the situation Luke describes in Acts 21.

Once again, the most straightforward reading of Acts 21, which does not require importing any prior assumptions into the text, is that the rumor is indeed false. Paul did *not* teach believers to abandon the Law of Moses, and he went to some length to reassure the believers in Jerusalem of this fact.

What About Gentile Believers?

One more verse requires our attention in Acts 21. After James instructs Paul to participate in a vow and temple worship to debunk the false rumor that he was unfaithful to the Law, James says the following:

Acts 21:25

[But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.”](#)

Here, James reiterates the Jerusalem Council’s decision given earlier in Acts 15:20. Some have taken this statement from James to mean that, while there is an expectation that *Jewish* Christians would continue to obey the Law of Moses, Gentile Christians need only keep four laws. John MacArthur articulates this perspective:

By urging this course of action on Paul’s part, the elders were by no means abrogating the decree of the Jerusalem Council regarding Gentiles. Gentiles were not to be required to observe the ceremonies and rituals of the Mosaic law. To make that absolutely clear, James summarized the decision of the council that Gentiles were only required to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. Since Paul was Jewish, his participation in the ceremony would not violate that decision.

—John MacArthur, *Acts 13-28* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 1996), 253

So, according to MacArthur, verse 25 is meant to clarify that Paul’s actions do not suggest that Gentile Christians must follow the Law of Moses beyond four laws. But is that an accurate interpretation of

James's statement? Is James really implying that while Jewish Christians, including Paul, are free to be Torah observant, Gentile Christians are not expected to advance beyond these four laws in their walk of faith? That interpretation might be possible *only* if one approaches Acts 21:25 with an inaccurate understanding of what was decided at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15.

To give some context, in Acts 15, the apostles reached the decision that newly converted Gentile believers were not required to be circumcised and keep the whole Law of Moses to be saved and welcomed into the Christian community (Acts 15:1, 5). Both Jews and Gentiles are saved by grace through faith in the Messiah, not through circumcision or Law observance (Acts 15:11). Therefore, according to the apostles, the Gentile believers should be received into the community without having to be circumcised and taking on the entire Law right away. However, it was still important to assure the Jewish believers that these Gentiles were genuinely committed to following the God of Israel. Therefore, James proposed that the Gentile believers should initially adhere to four fundamental laws derived from the Torah (Acts 15:20). The Law of Moses already teaches that followers of the God of Israel—native Israelites and sojourners alike—should avoid eating meat offered to idols, blood, and things that have been strangled, and it also teaches that they should avoid sexual immorality (Exodus 34:15; Leviticus 17:13-16; 18; 20:6-21; Numbers 25:1-2; Deuteronomy 12:16, 23). These are the same laws we see reiterated here in Acts 21:25.

Why these four laws? Well, because these issues were directly related to idolatrous worship practices. Thus, observing these laws was intended to show that the Gentile believers had fully renounced idolatry and embraced the God of Israel (See Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 462–467).

Obviously, these four laws were not intended to be comprehensive nor the only laws that the Gentiles needed to obey forever. For instance, nobody thinks Gentile Christians are allowed to murder, steal, or lie. Paul instructs his Gentile readers to obey many other commands of the Torah beyond these four laws (e.g., Romans 13:9), including certain commands often categorized as “ceremonial laws.” For instance, in 1 Corinthians 5:8, Paul instructs his mostly Gentile audience to “celebrate the festival” of Passover.

In light of these facts, the best approach to understanding these four laws in Acts 15:20 and 21:25 is to consider them as representing the starting point of fellowship. They were the initial requirements Gentile believers needed to follow so they could join the synagogue community alongside Jewish believers. But the idea was not that the Gentile believers would stop at those four laws. The idea was that the new Gentile believers would learn and begin to apply the rest of God's laws as they continued attending synagogue services every Sabbath. This is clear from the conclusion of the apostles' ruling:

Acts 15:21

For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

According to scholar Ajith Fernando:

James's concluding point in verse 21 was probably made to reassure the Christians who had come from the Pharisees and who wanted to see the Torah taught among the Gentiles. He says that this was happening in the synagogues in every city each Sabbath.

—Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 419

For more on the Gentile believer's relationship to the Torah, see our teachings [Acts 15: Obedience or Legalism?](#) and [Is the Torah for Gentiles, Too?](#)

So, the Jerusalem Council ruled that Gentile believers should be embraced as full members of the synagogue community without first being circumcised. The four Torah laws imposed upon the Gentiles were meant to serve as a starting point for fellowship, showing that they had turned away from idolatry and were committed to the God of Israel. Then, as they attended synagogue services every Sabbath, the Gentile believers would be taught the rest of God's laws.

That is what the Apostles' judgment in Acts 15 was about, and that is what James has in mind when he references that judgment in Acts 21:25. He is not suggesting that Gentiles do not need to advance beyond four laws in their spiritual walk. He is simply reiterating what was already decided: Gentiles need to comply with four laws so they can join the synagogue community alongside Jewish believers and hear the Torah taught every Sabbath.

So, why does James restate the Jerusalem Council's ruling in this context? Remember, James and Paul are addressing Jewish concerns about Paul's ministry. The Jewish believers had heard rumors that Paul taught believers to abandon the Law of Moses. It is likely that James brings up the Jerusalem Council's decision in order to address Jewish concerns about Paul's ministry to the Gentiles. The Jerusalem Council's decision, which Paul himself endorsed and delivered to various churches (Acts 16:4), provides additional proof that Paul is not permitting the diaspora communities to become lawless or infected with idolatry. So, because Paul abides by the Jerusalem Council's decision, the Jewish believers can rest assured that Paul's ministry to the Gentiles would not corrupt the Christian communities. As Robert Wall writes:

[T]his repetition of James's verdict provides a narrative prompt for a review of Paul's mission in Acts: At no time has Paul allowed the "pollutions of idols" to contaminate a Jewish identity in the congregations of the diaspora church.

—Robert. W. Wall, *Acts*, NIB (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 294

So, in Acts 21:25, James does not intend to define all that's required of Gentile believers in contrast to what's required of Jewish believers. The Jerusalem Council's ruling was that Gentiles must renounce idolatrous practices to join the synagogue community. James cites the Council's ruling, which Paul endorsed, as additional proof that Paul's ministry would not lead to spiritual compromise. The fact that Paul agrees with this ruling reinforces that Paul is not teaching against the Law.

Conclusion

Acts 21 reveals that, decades after Yeshua's resurrection, thousands of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem remained zealous for the Law of Moses. However, a rumor had spread that Paul taught believers to forsake the Law. When confronted with this rumor during his visit to Jerusalem, Paul did not confirm it. Instead, Paul took specific actions to demonstrate that the rumor was false and that he remained faithful to the Law. Paul's actions were not designed to deceive the Jerusalem Christians. Paul was consistently obedient to the Law, and he repeatedly affirms this throughout the Book of Acts. James's mention of the Jerusalem Council's decision in verse 25 is a reminder to Jewish believers that Paul's ministry to Gentiles would not lead to idolatry and lawlessness.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

EMAIL: Info@119ministries.com

FACEBOOK: www.facebook.com/119Ministries

WEBSITE: www.TestEverything.net & www.ExaminaloTodo.net

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