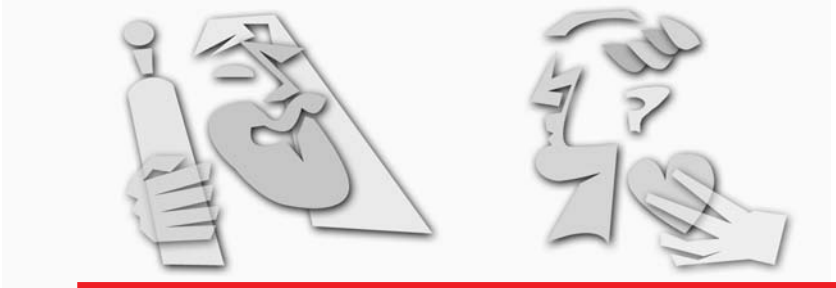


Jew and Gentile



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Leviticus 23, Matt. 19:17, Acts 15:1–29, Gal. 1:1–12, Heb. 8:6, Rev. 12:17.*

Memory Text: “The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (*John 1:17*).

The first converts to Christianity were all Jews, and the New Testament gives no indication that they were asked to drop the practice of circumcision or to ignore the Jewish festivals. But when the Gentiles began to accept Christianity, important questions arose. Should the Gentiles submit to circumcision? To what extent should they keep other Jewish laws? Finally, a council was called at Jerusalem to settle the matter (*see Acts 15*).

Despite a firm decision by the council not to trouble the Gentiles with a host of regulations and laws, some teachers continued to plague the churches by insisting that Gentile converts to the faith were required to keep these rules and laws, including circumcision.

In some ways, these issues exist today, only in a different form. How often are we, as Seventh-day Adventists, accused of being Judaizers, or legalists, because of our adherence to the Ten Commandments (or, in actuality, our adherence to the Sabbath commandment)? How often do we hear that we are now under the New Covenant, and so the law (the Sabbath commandment) has been done away with?

On the other side, at times as a church we are confronted with those who would like to impose more Old Testament rules and regulations on us, as well.

Hence, Romans certainly has an important message for us today, as it did for the Roman church back then.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 10.*

Better Promises

Read Hebrews 8:6. What is the message here? How do we understand what these “better promises” are?

Perhaps the greatest difference between the religion of the Old Testament and that of the New is the fact that the New Testament era was introduced by the coming of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. He was sent by God to be the Savior. Men could not ignore Him and expect to be saved. Only through the atonement He provided could they have their sins forgiven. Only by the imputation of His perfect life could they stand before God without condemnation. In other words, salvation was through the righteousness of Jesus, and nothing else.

Old Testament saints looked forward to the blessings of the Messianic age and the promise of salvation. In New Testament times, the people were confronted with the question, *Would they accept Jesus of Nazareth, whom God had sent as the Messiah, their Savior?* If they believed in Him—that is, if they accepted Him for who He truly was and committed themselves to Him—they would be saved through the righteousness that He offers them freely.

Meanwhile, the moral requirements remain unchanged in the New Testament, because these were founded in the character of God and of Christ. Obedience to God’s moral law is just as much a part of the New Covenant as of the Old.

Read Matthew 19:17; Revelation 12:17; 14:12; and James 2:10, 11. What do these texts tell us about the moral law in the New Testament?

At the same time, the entire body of ritual and ceremonial laws that were distinctly Israelite, that were distinctly tied to the Old Covenant, all of which pointed to Jesus and to His death and ministry as High Priest, were discontinued, and a new order was introduced, one based on “better promises.”

Helping both Jew and Gentile to understand what was involved in this transition from Judaism to Christianity was one of Paul’s principal aims in the book of Romans. It would take time to make the transition.

What are some of your favorite Bible promises? How often do you claim them? What choices are you making that can stand in the way of having these promises fulfilled in your life?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *John 1:17*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Describe the great divide between legalism and righteousness by faith in the early church as well as in the church today.

Feel: Appreciate Paul and other church leaders' passionate defense of righteousness by faith.

Do: Examine his or her life for evidence of the light and power of grace, as well as the gift of obedience.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Slide Toward Works

A Some Jewish Christians emphasized Jewish laws and traditions as necessary for Gentile converts to follow, while others emphasized salvation by faith alone as critical for Jews and Gentiles alike. What were the consequences?

B How did Paul and other church leaders face the first faction in the church?

II. Feel: Better Promises

A Why were Paul and other leaders in the church so ardent about not burdening Christian believers with superfluous religious traditions?

B What are the "better promises" (*Heb. 8:6, NIV*) held out to believers? What were some of the regulations that the church felt were important to note as still binding?

III. Do: Commitment to Grace

A Where do you stand in relationship to religious traditions and righteousness by faith?

B What importance does obedience to God's law have in your life?

C How are you championing the importance of grace in your life, as well as in your witness?

► **Summary:** Like the early Christian church, there is still the tendency to focus on what we do, rather than depending entirely on Christ's atoning sacrifice and His promise to live out His life in us.

Jewish Laws and Regulations

As time allows, skim through the book of Leviticus. (See, for instance, *Leviticus 12, 16, 23.*) **What thoughts come to your mind as you read all these rules and regulations and rituals? Why would many of these be all but impossible to follow in New Testament times?**

It is convenient for us to classify Old Testament laws into various categories: (1) moral law, (2) ceremonial law, (3) civil law, (4) statutes and judgments, and (5) health laws.

This classification is, in part, artificial. In actuality, some of these categories are interrelated, and there is considerable overlap. The ancients did not see them as separate and distinct.

The moral law is summed up by the Ten Commandments (*Exod. 20:1–17*). This law sums up the moral requirements of humanity. These ten precepts are amplified and applied in various statutes and judgments throughout the first five books of the Bible. These amplifications show what it meant to keep the law of God in various situations. Not unrelated are the civil laws. These, too, are based on the moral law. These define a citizen's relationship to civil authorities and to his or her fellow citizens. They name the penalties for various infractions.

The ceremonial law regulated the sanctuary ritual, describing the various offerings and the individual citizen's responsibilities. The feast days are specified and their observance defined.

The health laws overlap the other laws. The various laws relating to uncleanness define ceremonial uncleanness, and yet go beyond this to include hygienic and health principles. Laws regarding clean and unclean meats are based on physical considerations.

While the Jew probably largely thought of all these laws as a package, having all come from God, he or she must have made certain distinctions mentally. The Ten Commandments had been spoken by God directly to the people. This would set them apart as especially important. The other laws had been relayed through Moses. The sanctuary ritual could be kept only while a sanctuary was in operation.

The civil laws, at least in large part, could no longer be imposed after the Jews lost their independence and came under the civil control of another nation. Many of the ceremonial precepts could no longer be observed after the temple was destroyed. Also, after the Messiah came, many of the types had met their antitypes and no longer had validity.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The early church’s debate over whether—or how much—Christians must obey Old Testament laws mirrors our efforts today to strike a balance between law and grace in our own spiritual lives.

Just for Teachers: In this week’s lesson we discuss the issues faced by the early church in regard to the role of law and grace in one’s salvation.

The great American writer Ambrose Bierce defined a Christian as “one who believes that the New Testament is a divinely inspired book admirably suited to the spiritual needs of his neighbor.” One thing we can see from this is that Bierce hadn’t been exposed to the right kind of Christian. But, as in all canards, there is a grain of truth to it.

Bierce probably was referring to the garden-variety hypocrite, who believes that loving one’s neighbor, caring for the least of these, and so on, is a burden to be borne by someone other than oneself. As Luke 11:46 suggests, this school of thought has a long history.

But there’s another aspect implicit in Bierce’s scathing witticism equally worthy of consideration. Most of us would affirm that the New Testament teaches that we are saved by grace and that there is nothing we can do to be saved. But when you say “we,” does it include you? Do you truly believe you are saved by grace, or are you burdening yourself with things you must do to be accepted? Is the gospel for you, or is it just admirably suited to your neighbor?

Consider This: In Matthew 11:30, Jesus says that “‘my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.’” Why do we often feel a need to make it heavier for ourselves or others?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. The Law as Jesus Saw It, and the Law as We See It in Jesus (*Review with your class Matthew 5:17, 18 and Matthew 22:34–40.*)

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“What Must I Do to Be Saved?”

Read Acts 15:1. What issue was causing dissension? Why would some people believe that this wasn't just for the Jewish nation? See *Gen. 17:10*.

While the apostles united with the ministers and lay members at Antioch in an earnest effort to win many souls to Christ, certain Jewish believers from Judaea “of the sect of the Pharisees” succeeded in introducing a question that soon led to widespread controversy in the church and brought consternation to the believing Gentiles. With great assurance, these teachers asserted that in order to be saved, one must be circumcised and must keep the entire ceremonial law. The Jews, after all, always had prided themselves on their divinely appointed services, and many of those who had been converted to the faith of Christ still felt that since God had once clearly outlined the Hebrew manner of worship, it was improbable that He would ever authorize a change in any of its specifications. They insisted that the Jewish laws and ceremonies should be incorporated into the rites of the Christian religion. They were slow to discern that all the sacrificial offerings had but prefigured the death of the Son of God, in which type met antitype, and after which the rites and ceremonies of the Mosaic dispensation were no longer binding.

Read Acts 15:2–12. How was this dispute to be settled?

“While looking to God for direct guidance, he [Paul] was ever ready to recognize the authority vested in the body of believers united in church fellowship. He felt the need of counsel, and when matters of importance arose, he was glad to lay these before the church and to unite with his brethren in seeking God for wisdom to make right decisions.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 200.

It's interesting that Paul, who often talked about his prophetic calling and how Jesus had called him and gave him his mission, was so willing to work with the larger church body. That is, whatever his calling, he realized that he was part of the church as a whole and that he needed to work with it as much as possible.

What is your attitude toward church leadership? How cooperative are you? Why is cooperation so important? How could we function if everyone was doing only what he or she wanted, independent of the larger body?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Early in His ministry Jesus made clear that His purpose was not to nullify or destroy the law as revealed in the Old Testament but to fulfill it. In keeping with this purpose, the early Christians took the law very seriously.

Fundamental to the Christian theology of God's law were two things: Jesus' teaching about the law and Jesus' fulfillment of the law in His life, death, and resurrection.

First, Jesus' teaching about the law intended to strip it to its essentials. In Matthew 22:34–40, when a Pharisee asked Him which is the greatest of the commandments, Jesus brought it down to its elements: love of God and love of one's fellow humans. As such, Jesus gave His followers—present and future—a basis to judge and evaluate all their actions, thoughts, and attitudes, even those that may have seemed outwardly law-abiding but were motivated perhaps wrongly or were damaging to others.

Second, Jesus attempted, in His life and ministry, to direct His disciples away from the wrongheaded legalism of the Pharisees and others who attempted to obey the law in their own strength. This lesson is just as relevant for us today. While obedience to the law is important and necessary, salvation comes by looking to Jesus: His example and His finished work on our behalf.

Consider This: What can one see to be underlying Jesus' teaching about the law, and how did the Christian Pharisees of Acts 15:5 undercut it, even while possibly seeming plausible and logical?


II. Jews, Gentiles, and Others *(Review with your class Acts 15.)*

From the earliest days, circumcision was a sign underlying the unique relationship of the Israelites/Jews to God. The circumcision of every human male in his household ratified Abraham's covenant with Yahweh.

The person who was circumcised in body also was required to be circumcised in mind and heart, as commanded in Deuteronomy 10:16, Deuteronomy 30:6, and Jeremiah 4:4. One who was circumcised in heart and mind was one who responded readily to God's call and leading, someone who literally had given up something to follow God. The physical act was extremely painful for an adult male, and those Gentiles who underwent it and became full converts to Judaism were regarded highly.

It is important to realize that Paul and the other apostles recognized the spiritual meaning of circumcision and respected it. However, at the same time, true circumcision is that of the heart (*Rom. 2:29*).

Consider This: All the laws of God, even those that might have seemed

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“No Greater Burden”

Read Acts 15:5–29. What decision did the council come to, and what was its reasoning?

The decision was against the contentions of the Judaizers. These folk insisted that the Gentile converts be circumcised and keep the entire ceremonial law, and that “the Jewish laws and ceremonies should be incorporated into the rites of the Christian religion.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 189.

It’s interesting to note in verse 10 how Peter depicted these old laws as a “yoke” that they were unable to bear. Would the Lord, who instituted those laws, make them a yoke on His people? That hardly seems so. Instead, over the years some of the leaders had, through their oral traditions, turned many of the laws, which were meant to be blessings, into burdens. The council sought to spare Gentiles from these burdens.

Notice, too, that there was no mention or question of the Gentiles not needing to obey the Ten Commandments. After all, could we imagine the council telling them not to eat blood, but that it was acceptable to ignore the commandments against adultery or murder and the like?

What rules were placed on the Gentile believers (*Acts 15:20, 29*), and why these specific ones?

Although Jewish believers weren’t to impose their rules and traditions on Gentiles, the council wanted to make sure that the Gentiles didn’t do things that would have been deemed offensive to the Jews who were united with them in Jesus. The apostles and elders, therefore, agreed to instruct the Gentiles by letter to abstain from meats offered to idols, from fornication, from things strangled, and from blood. Some say that, because Sabbath keeping wasn’t specifically mentioned, it must not have been meant for the Gentiles (of course, the commandments against lying and murder weren’t specifically mentioned either, so that argument means nothing).

Could we, in some ways, be laying burdens on people that are not necessary but are more from tradition than divine command? If so, how? Bring your thoughts to class on Sabbath.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

difficult or painful, were intended to be a blessing to those who followed them in the right spirit. Conversely, how can these same laws become an intolerable burden even to those who sincerely desire to follow God?

III. Christian Pharisees? *(Review with your class Acts 15:5.)*

Christian Pharisees. To the average reader of the New Testament, this phrase is about as paradoxical, or even downright contradictory, as “pacifists for nuclear proliferation.” And yet that is what the individuals described in Acts 15:5 were—they were Christians, and they were Pharisees. Most translations describe them as “of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed.” As such, they believed that Jesus was the Messiah. Their contention that new converts must be circumcised and obey the laws of Moses was considered seriously by the church but ultimately rejected and dismissed.

Like the Pharisees, we all come to Christ bearing baggage. These may be bad habits. Or they may be false or unnecessary beliefs about God, others, ourselves, or the universe at large. God accepts us as we are—and so should the church—but He wants to help us grow beyond these things. All that is necessary is for us to be willing to listen, to have circumcised hearts and ears. At some point, we must decide which attachments are most important to us.

Consider This: In what ways are you, like the “Christian Pharisees,” clinging to beliefs, customs, or habits that are false or no longer useful to your walk with God?

► STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Encourage your students to use these questions to think about the Christian hope as it relates to their own lives and to the world at large.

Thought Questions:

① What distinguishes the Ten Commandments—or the moral law—from all the other ceremonial, civil, and health laws? In responding to people who accuse Seventh-day Adventists of being legalists, why is it significant that the Sabbath commandment is one of the ten?

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The Galatian Heresy

However clear the counsel, there were those who sought to go their own way and who continued to advocate that the Gentiles keep Jewish traditions and laws. For Paul, this became a very serious matter; that is, it wasn't trifling over the fine points of faith. It had become a denial of the gospel of Christ itself.

Read Galatians 1:1–12. How serious does Paul see the issue he is confronting in Galatia? What should that tell us about how important this question is?

As stated before, the Galatian situation in large degree prompted the content of the letter to Rome. In the Epistle to the Romans, Paul further develops the theme of the Galatian epistle. The Judaizers were contending that the law God had given them through Moses was important and should be observed by Gentile converts. Paul was trying to show its true place and function. He didn't want these people to gain a foothold in Rome as they had done in Galatia.

It is an oversimplification to ask whether in Galatians and Romans Paul is speaking of ceremonial or moral laws. Historically, the argument was whether or not Gentile converts should be required to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses. The Jerusalem council had already ruled on this question, but some refused to follow its decision. Some read in Paul's letters to the Galatians and the Romans evidence that the moral law, the Ten Commandments (or, in truth, only the fourth commandment), is no longer binding on Christians. Yet, they are missing the point of the letters, missing the historical context and issues that Paul was addressing. Paul, as we'll see, stressed that salvation was by faith alone and not by keeping the law, even the moral law—yet that isn't the same thing as saying that the moral law shouldn't be kept. Obedience to the Ten Commandments was never an issue; those who make it one are reading back into texts a contemporary issue, one that Paul wasn't dealing with.

How do you respond to those who claim the Sabbath is no longer binding upon Christians? How can you show the truth of the Sabbath in a way that complements the integrity of the gospel?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

2 What was at the root of the issue of circumcision and the imposition of other Old Testament laws that clearly were specific to the Israelites before the time of Christ? Why was Paul so vehement in his opposition to those who continued to preach circumcision and other forms of legalism? Why couldn't the issue be considered as a matter of "agreeing to disagree"?

Application Questions:

1 The resolution of the problem of whether to require circumcision and observance of Jewish law of Gentile converts was clearly a compromise in some ways. Paul is on record as saying that the eating of meat sacrificed to idols was in itself not significant (*1 Cor. 8:4*). Why was Paul, who could be so uncompromising on some things, willing to accept this compromise? Is there any guidance here for us as to when it is acceptable to compromise?

2 The temptation to indulge some form of legalism is universal. What is it about legalism that appeals to us? Is it always easy to distinguish between legalism—or the desire to achieve salvation by one's own efforts in scrupulously obeying the law—and a sincere desire to do one's best for God?

3 Do we encounter legalistic situations in our church today, similar to what Paul faced, when we introduce converts to the faith? How can we better acclimate converts to Seventh-day Adventism and the legitimate expectations we have about finances (tithing)? Diet? Health practices (nonsmoking and non-drinking of alcohol, for example)? Sabbath observance? Furthermore, how do we acclimate them to these expectations while, at the same time, protecting them from those who would give them false information about requirements, based more upon personal opinions and preferences than upon the Bible?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: This week we have explored the ways in which God's law related to the Christian faith as it developed in the first century and how it applies today to our experience as Christians and Seventh-day Adventists.

Look at the books of the Pentateuch, such as Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, where we find the bulk of the Old Testament laws. Write down on index cards individual laws and where they are found in the text. Make enough cards that each class member can receive one. Starting in whatever order you choose, have each member read aloud what is on his or her card. Ask whether that particular law is a moral, ceremonial, civil, or health law, and how we know. You also might want to explore possible spiritual applications of laws that fall into the ceremonial or civil category. What principles were behind them?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Jew and Gentile,” pp. 188–192, 194–197; “Apostasy in Galatia,” pp. 383–388, in *The Acts of the Apostles*; “The Law Given to Israel,” pp. 310–312; “The Law and the Covenants,” pp. 370–373, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*; “The Chosen People,” pp. 27–30, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“But if the Abrahamic covenant contained the promise of redemption, why was another covenant formed at Sinai? In their bondage the people had to a great extent lost the knowledge of God and of the principles of the Abrahamic covenant. . . .

“The people did not realize the sinfulness of their own hearts, and that without Christ it was impossible for them to keep God’s law; and they readily entered into covenant with God.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 371, 372.

“Through the influence of false teachers who had arisen among the believers in Jerusalem, division, heresy, and sensualism were rapidly gaining ground among the believers in Galatia. These false teachers were mingling Jewish traditions with the truths of the gospel. Ignoring the decision of the general council at Jerusalem, they urged upon the Gentile converts the observance of the ceremonial law.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 383.

Discussion Questions:

❶ In class, go over your answer to Wednesday’s final question. In what ways might your local church or you in your own home or maybe even you with yourself be laying burdens on others (or on yourself) that are not necessary? How can we recognize whether we are really doing these things? Or might we be in danger of going too far the other way? That is, how can we recognize whether we have become too lax in our lifestyle and standards to the point where our lives don’t reflect the high calling that we have in Christ?

❷ What are some of the arguments folk use to claim that the Ten Commandments are no longer binding on Christians today? How do we answer those claims? Why, on the face of it, are those claims so wrong, and why in many cases do those who make such claims not really live as though they believe the Ten Commandments are no longer binding?

❸ Read again the first 12 verses in Galatians 1. Notice how uncompromising and how fervent Paul was regarding his understanding of the gospel. What should that tell us about how, at times, we must stand absolutely unwavering in certain beliefs, especially in a day and age of pluralism and relativism? How does this show that certain teachings cannot be compromised in any way?