

“UNDER THE LAW” IN 1 COR 9:19-22

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THE QUESTION

At first glance, in this section of Scripture Paul seems to say that he is no longer under the law, and therefore he no longer had to obey Torah. In other words, since he is now a “Christian” he no longer had to obey the Torah, since that is only for Jews. Could this be the true, or are we missing something? The ESV translates this section as follows:

1 Corinthians 9:19–23 ESV

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. 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. 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. 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. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

The traditional Christian view is stated clearly by Constable:

Tom Constable’s Expository Notes (1 Cor 9:21):

The references to law in this verse may be confusing. In describing Gentiles as being without law, Paul did not mean that Gentiles are totally lawless (cf. Rom. 2:14). He meant they were not under the Law of Moses as the Jews were (v. 20). Paul wanted his readers to understand that even though he did not observe the Mosaic Law when he was with Gentiles (Gr. *anomos*) he was still under God’s authority (*ennomos*). As a Christian he was not under the Law of Moses, but he was under the Law of Christ (cf. Gal. 6:2). The law of God for Jews before the Cross was the Law of Moses, but His law for Christians in the present age is the Law of Christ. The Law of Christ is the code of responsibilities that Christ and His apostles taught, which the New Testament contains. Some of the same commands are in the Mosaic Law though the codes, the Mosaic Law and the Law of Christ, are not the same.

While it may be technically possible to interpret these verses in this way, to do so requires them to be removed from the context of the whole of Scripture. This traditional view is based on an incorrect understanding of the Law of Moses (the Torah) and on Yeshua’s and Paul’s view of the Torah, as presented elsewhere in Scripture.

YESHUA’S VIEW OF TORAH

The notion that Christ or the apostles could have taught something other than complete obedience to the Torah is totally contradictory to the very words of the Messiah himself:

Matthew 5:17–19

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Even the least of the commands were to be obeyed. It is to be that way until all is accomplished; until heaven and earth pass away. Other Scriptures also show similar a perspective:

Mark 10:17-21 Yeshua first answer to the rich young ruler’s question about how to inherit eternal life is basically “Keep the Commandments”. And in Matt 23:23 he tells the Pharisees that they need to obey both the major and the minor commands of Scripture. In Mark 7:1-13 he instructs the people to obey the commands of God rather than the traditions of man.

Yeshua said:

John 14:15

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

But what were his commands?

John 14:24

Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me.

His commands were no different than those of the Father. How could they possibly be different? He and the Father are one. The Father’s commands are the Son’s commands.

YESHUA WAS SINLESS

Scriptures are also clear that Yeshua was without sin:

Hebrews 4:15

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, **yet without sin.**

1 Peter 2:21–22

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. **He committed no sin**, neither was deceit found in his mouth.

And what is sin? Most simply, sin is disobeying the commands of God. For Yeshua not to have sinned, he had to perfectly keep the Torah. And he did:

1 John 3:4–5

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and **in him there is no sin.**

This is even a stronger verse when one understands the word “lawlessness” as “Torah-lessness”. Those who sin break Torah. They live outside Torah. Yeshua, however, had no sin. He lived within Torah. If we are to “live like Christ”, we are to live like he did. And He lived in obedience to the commands of the Father. Yeshua is our example, tempted in all ways as we are, yet without sin.

Just as the twelve disciples were taught to live like their Rabbi, He instructed them to make other disciples, teaching them the very same thing:

Matthew 28:19–20

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

PAUL’S VIEW OF TORAH

When Paul was defending himself before the governor, countering the accusations of the Jewish leaders, he made it clear that he believes (and the clear implication was that he lives by) **everything** in the Torah:

Acts 24:14–16

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.

In Romans, Paul states clearly how he feels about the Torah. It is holy, righteous, and good:

Romans 7:12

So the law is holy, and the commandment is **holy and righteous and good.**

Furthermore, when talking about salvation coming from faith and not the “works of Torah”, he makes it clear that that faith upholds Torah. Our faith does not nullify Torah. On the contrary, it should lead to obedience of Torah:

Romans 3:31

Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! **On the contrary, we uphold the law.**

It should be remembered that Romans was written primary to a Gentile audience. So Paul is making it clear to Gentiles that their faith should lead them to keep Torah. Likewise, when Paul writes to the predominantly Gentile group of believers in Ephesians, he tells them:

2 Timothy 3:14–17

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. **All Scripture** is breathed out by God and **profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training** in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

“All Scriptures” does not refer to the “New Testament” since that did not exist yet. Paul was referring to the Torah, which can include not just the Pentateuch, but also the Writings and the Prophets; in other words, all of what we call the “Old Testament” today.

To Titus, Paul writes:

Titus 2:13–14

waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us **to redeem us from all lawlessness** and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

The Messiah came, not to free us from “the law”, but to redeem us from all lawlessness (Torah-lessness). He is the mediator of the New Covenant, which according to Jer 31 was to write the Torah upon our hearts:

Jeremiah 31:31–34

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: **I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.** And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

So contrary to common contemporary opinion, the New Covenant helps believers to keep Torah by writing it upon our hearts. In other words, we are given a heart-desire to keep the Father’s commands, because we know His love and grace and truly want to do whatever He asks in return for the love and grace He has shown us.

PAUL’S PHRASE “UNDER THE LAW”

So what does Paul mean when he says he is not “under the law”?

The Greek **nomos** usually translated “law” can have a variety of meanings. It can refer to law in general, such as the “laws of nature”, or it can refer to a specific set of laws, such as the Torah, which is the way Paul usually uses it. However even in that sense, it can refer to the written Torah, or potentially to the oral Torah, which is sometimes also referred to as the “traditions of the Fathers”. Furthermore, and crucial to understanding this portion of Scripture, First Century Greek had no separate word for “legalism”, so the same word **nomos** would be used to for either “law” or “legalism”. Thus, understanding the context is essential to understanding the writings of Paul when he uses the word **nomos**. Note the following by C.E.B. Cranfield (International Critical Commentary, Romans, p853):

“...that the Greek language of Paul’s day possessed no word-group corresponding to our ‘legalism,’ ‘legalist’ and ‘legalistic.’ This means that he lacked a convenient terminology for expressing a vital distinction, and so was surely seriously hampered in the work of clarifying the Christian position with regard to the law. In view of this, we should always, we think, be ready to

reckon with the possibility that Pauline statements which at first sight seem to disparage the law, were really directed not against the law itself but against that understanding and misuse of it for which we now have a convenient terminology. In this very difficult terrain, Paul was pioneering. If we make allowances for these circumstances, we shall not be so easily baffled or misled by a certain impreciseness of statement which we shall sometimes encounter."

Given the above, it quite possible (I would say likely) that the phrase **hupo nomos** "under the law" could be better translated "under legalism". If that were the case, it could be referring to the many traditions of the Fathers (oral Torah) and the Rabbinic "fences" (the various yokes of the Rabbis).

Paul uses this same phrase **hupo nomos** in his letter to Galatians. Although some English translations will also translate other Greek phrases into "under the law", for a more complete understanding of Paul's phrase **hupo nomos** in 1 Cor 9:20, it is important to look at the other contexts where Paul uses this exact same phrase. It turns out that the only place Paul uses this same phrase is in his letter to Galatians. For example, in Gal 4:21, Paul is clearly speaking disparagingly about those who desire to be "under the law":

Galatians 4:21–23

Tell me, you who desire to be **under the law**, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise.

Paul goes on to contrast the method of having a son by Hagar, born out of the plans of man (man's way), with the method of having a son by Sarah, born out of faith in the promise of God (God's way). So those "under the law" would be paralleled with those who are trying to obtain their right standing with God by doing it man's way... by keeping the legalistic traditions of the elders and fences of the Rabbis. So it seems Paul is using the phrase here to describe a type of legalism – those who follow the traditions and teachings of man and think that will give them right standing with God. Paul uses the term again a bit later in the letter in much the same context:

Galatians 5:18–19

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not **under the law**. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality,

Again this seems to indicate a difference in following the Spirit (God's way) versus following man's way. To read these verses as indicating that Paul is teaching against following Torah would lead to a major conflict with the teachings of Yeshua and Paul himself. But there is no need to create such a conflict if it is understood that Paul is teaching here against the legalistic practices of the day.

In fact, later in Galatians, Paul says that if anyone sins (what is sin?? breaking Torah!), he should be restored with gentleness:

Galatians 6:1–2

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Here too (as in 1 Cor 9) Paul refers to the "law of Christ" in the context of restoring those in sin with gentleness and bearing one another's burdens. Messiah, as the mediator of the New Covenant, was initiating the writing of the Torah on the hearts of His followers, just as Jer 31:31 states.

A BETTER TRANSLATION

David Stern, in the Jewish New Testament, translated the section of 1 Corinthians 9 as follows:

1 Corinthians 9:19-22 Jewish New Testament.

¹⁹ For although I am a free man, not bound to do anyone's bidding, I have made myself a slave to all in order to win as many people as possible. ²⁰ That is, with Jews, what I did was put myself in the position of a Jew, in order to win Jews. With people in subjection to a legalistic perversion of the *Torah*, I put myself in the position of someone under such legalism, in order to win those under this legalism, even though I myself am not in subjection to a legalistic perversion of the *Torah*. ²¹ With those who live outside the framework of *Torah*, I put myself in the position of someone outside the *Torah* in order to

win those outside the *Torah*—although I myself am not outside the framework of God’s *Torah* but within the framework of *Torah* as upheld by the Messiah.²² With the “weak” I became “weak,” in order to win the “weak.” With all kinds of people I have become all kinds of things, so that in all kinds of circumstances I might save at least some of them.

This translation is far better than most of the English translations.

The point is that, Paul is simply saying that he is trying his best to relate to people as they are. He wants to see things from their perspective; understand life as they see it. In that way he can more effectively communicate the good news to them.