



Balance:

Seven Critical Guidelines

by
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How should a talmid of Yeshua view Paul's epistles? For those who desire to be faithful and to live "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of G-d," seven guidelines are listed below. The Bible student should keep these guidelines in mind when reading Rav Sha'ul's writings.

Guideline 1: Over-all Biblical Context.

Paul's epistles, like any other part of Scripture, must be viewed in the light of the entire Bible. This means that when we are dealing with the Law, we must not focus in on a few statements Paul made, and ignore everything else the Bible says about G-d's Torah. As pointed out earlier, Paul's writings make up approximately 5% of the Bible. They must be understood in a way that will make them compatible with what the other 95% of the Bible says. In other words, let the other 95% of the Bible interpret the 5% that Paul wrote.

Guideline 2: Historical Context.

Because Paul often wrote to correct particular problems in particular churches, we must have some knowledge of the situation Paul was addressing if we are to understand his writings. Unfortunately, many people come to an understanding of Paul that contradicts what the rest of the Bible teaches, either by incorrectly reconstructing the historical background, or by ignoring it all together.

Guideline 3: Peter's Warning.

It is important to bear in mind Peter's warning that Paul's letters are not easy to understand: "His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. Therefore, dear friends, since you already know

this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position" (2 Peter 3:16f). Those with little or no knowledge of the Tanakh are especially apt to misinterpret Paul's writings to their own ruin. Notice, it's not the Torah-keeping talmidim of Yeshua who distort Paul's epistles — it's "lawless men" that Peter warns us about.

Guideline 4: Yeshua's Warning.

Early in His ministry, the Messiah spoke this warning to His followers: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Torah, not until everything that must happen has happened. Anyone guilty of breaking the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5: 17-19).

Yeshua's warning seems plain and simple enough to understand, yet many Christians mistakenly believe that by fulfilling the Law, He thereby abolished it. This is exactly what He is warning us not to think! "I have come to fulfill the Law," He says, "but do not even think that by fulfilling it, I am thereby abolishing it."

Sometimes it's easier for people outside Mainstream Christianity to see the blindness of Christians in this area. The *Jewish Encyclopedia* quotes Yeshua's warning of Matthew 5:17, and then makes this bold statement: "The rejection of the Law by Christianity, therefore, was a departure from its Christ."¹

In an article with the catchy title, "Jesus Was Not a Christian," the writer points out that "Jesus certainly wouldn't have been recognized as a Christian throughout his entire life." He "scupulously adhered to the law of Moses" and "enjoined his disciples to keep every detail of the Torah."²

A story in the *New York Yiddish Forward* tells of a reporter's encounter with an old Hasidic Jew in Paris years ago. This Jew had a fervent faith in Jesus as the Messiah. When the reporter asked him about the compatibility of Orthodox Judaism and belief in Jesus, the old man replied, "Who then should believe in Him — the gentiles?"³

Guideline 5: Paul's Positive Statements About The Law.

Many Christians overlook or choose to ignore the positive things Paul said about the Torah. He writes, for example, "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good" (Romans 7:12). Paul says, "For in my inner being I delight in G-d's law" and "I myself in my mind am a slave to G-d's law" (Romans 7: 22,25).

He tells Timothy, "We know that the law is good if one uses it properly" (1 Timothy 1:8). To the Corinthians, he writes, "Keeping G-d's commandments is what counts" (1 Cor. 7:19). Even when explaining the righteousness that comes by faith, Paul is careful to make sure his readers know that their faith does not give them an excuse to ignore G-d's Torah: "Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law" (Romans 3:31).

Guideline 6: Paul's Negative Statements About The Law.

Paul, in his negative statements about the Law, was not criticizing Torah itself, but man's misuse of

the Torah. The Torah was meant to be a moral guide for a people already justified by faith, but some people in Paul's day were depending on their Law-keeping as the means of their justification before G-d. What Paul criticized was not Law-keeping itself, but making Law-keeping the basis of one's justification before G-d.

One writer puts it this way: "Paul, in his epistles, affirms the law, yet condemns the wrong emphasis men place upon it. In this sense he is turning believers back to the original intent of the law, it being a rule for godly living for those who are already redeemed. He rejects the later shift towards making it a means of salvation."⁴

Another author says basically the same thing when he writes, "Paul rejects the law as a method of salvation but upholds it as a standard for Christian conduct."⁵

Guideline 7: Paul's Example.

If we truly want to understand Paul's attitude towards keeping or not keeping the law, we must look at his actions as well as his words.

It's very clear that Paul continued to be Torah-observant after he met the Messiah. The only thing changed was Paul's reason for keeping the law. Before, he had kept it in an effort to be justified before God. After meeting the Messiah, he found the justification he had sought through his Law-keeping. Paul was justified through faith, and the Torah was internalized, "written upon the heart," as Jeremiah prophesied it would be (Jeremiah 31: 31-34). Now he desired to obey G-d's commandments because of the inward impulse of his new nature.

The key to godly living is not to ignore the Law and elevate Paul. Nor is the solution to overemphasize the Law and reject Paul, as the Ebionites and others did. The solution is to do what Paul said to do: "Follow my example, as I follow the example of the Messiah" (1 Corinthians 11:1). If we truly follow Paul's example, as he followed the example of Messiah Yeshua, we will begin to practice the commands in the Torah that the Church has ignored or changed.

1. *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Isidore Singer (New York and London: Funk and Wagnalls, 1903).

2. John Murray Smoot, "Jesus Was Not a Christian," *A Way in the Wilderness*, ed. M.G. Einspruch (Baltimore: The Lederer Foundation, 1981), p28.

3. J. Feldman, "Yozel's Hasid," *The Ox, the Ass, and the Oyster*, ed. Henry and Marie Einspruch (Baltimore: The Lederer Foundation, 1975), p74.

4. Michael Schiffman, "A Pauline Understanding of the Place of the Law for New Covenant Believers," *The Messianic Outreach*, 7:3, Spring 1988, p9.

5. Bacchiocchi, Samuele. *The Sabbath in the New Testament* (Berrien Springs, MI: University Printers, 1985), p101.