

*Galatians does not reject human effort or rule-keeping.*¹

Paul addresses a particular problem in the Galatian churches: Certain people require believers to be circumcised and follow the law of Moses.

Some modern interpreters mistakenly generalize Paul's complaint to other unrelated issues.

Instead, follow this principle to understand a text: First, understand the intent of the author in his original context. Then, draw conclusions from that understanding.

Circumcision is the problem in the Galatian churches.

The circumcision party teaches that circumcision and obeying the law of Moses is necessary for salvation. Paul opposes them. This is the original setting. He complains about their influence without yet identifying them.

I am amazed: You have suddenly deserted the one who invited you by the mercy of the messiah for another 'good news'. It actually is not. They are only disturbing you. They are trying to distort the good news about the messiah.²

Paul defends his Jewish credentials and conduct as a Christian missionary.³ He claims that his commission comes directly from God.⁴ Then he criticizes Peter for accommodating the circumcision party.

[Peter] avoided them and stayed away. He was afraid of *those circumcision people*.⁵

The claims of the circumcision group provoke a meeting between Paul and the apostles in Jerusalem.

"If you are not *circumcised* in Moses's custom, you cannot be saved. ... It is required to *circumcise* them and to order them to *keep Moses's law*."⁶

The bulk of Galatians contrasts the law of Moses with faith in Jesus.⁷ Paul contrasts himself with the circumcision party. He insists that the circumcision requirement is nullified.

Look, this is Paul speaking to you. If you must be *circumcised*, the messiah does not benefit you at all. I admit again: Every *circumcised* man must obey *the entire law*. Those who are justified by *the law* are separate from the messiah. They left mercy.⁸

A hideous taunt certifies that the topic is circumcision.

May those who trouble you be *castrated!*⁹

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2. Galatians 1:6-7.

3. Galatians 1:13-14.

4. Galatians 1:1, 1:11-12, 1:15.

5. Galatians 2:12.

6. Acts 15:1-2, 15:5.

7. Galatians 2:15-5:15. This is in response to his complaints about the conduct of Peter and others (Galatians 2:1-14).

8. Galatians 5:2-4. At no point does Paul generalize this principle beyond circumcision and keeping the law of Moses.

9. Galatians 5:12.

Paul comes back to the topic of circumcision in his conclusion.

Neither *circumcision nor uncircumcision* is anything. A new creation is what matters.¹

On multiple occasions, Paul insists that circumcision is meaningless.² Paul's arguments about the particular situation in Galatia³ is not a comprehensive systematic theology of salvation. It is about whether following Jesus requires submission to circumcision and the Sinaitic legal requirements.⁴

The circumcision party's requirement of circumcision and keeping the law of Moses is the specific problem Paul addresses. Virtually every statement in the letter relates to this situation.

Galatians is not a summary of Paul's theology.

Galatians is often described as a summary of Paul's teaching.

Galatians stands as an eloquent and vigorous apologetic for the essential NT truth that people are justified by faith in Jesus Christ—by nothing less and nothing more. ... It is often referred to as the "Magna Carta of Christian Liberty."⁵

Others make similar assertions.

The apostle set out what was destined to become the charter of Christian liberty through the subsequent history of the Church.⁶

Sixteenth century circumstances in church relations colored Martin Luther's understanding of Galatians. Before discussing the text of Galatians, Luther has already decided that Paul's gospel includes "free justification by faith."

St. Paul wrote this epistle because, after his departure from the Galatian churches, Jewish-Christian fanatics moved in, who perverted Paul's Gospel of man's *free justification by faith* in Christ Jesus.⁷

After Luther, many Protestants, particularly evangelicals, treat Galatians as a systematic statement of Paul's thinking about the gospel.⁸

However, even many Catholic interpreters now hold this position.

Galatians is thus a summary of basic Pauline theology.⁹

1. Galatians 6:15.

2. "There is *neither Jew nor Greek*" (Galatians 3:28). "*Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision carries any weight*" (Galatians 5:6). "For *neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything*" (Galatians 6:15).

3. The circumcision party is not causing problems in Galatia alone. They consume Paul's attention in numerous places (Romans 3:28-30, 10:12, 14:5-6, Ephesians 2:11, Colossians 2:11-12, 2:16, 1 Timothy 1:7-8, Titus 1:10). The Jerusalem leaders convene a meeting just to deal with this crisis (Acts 15:1-35).

4. This is the assertion of the circumcision party. There is no evidence that this party advocates libertarianism, egalitarianism, political freedom, democracy, rule-keeping, austerity, judgmentalism, self-justification, earning your own salvation, card-playing, or dancing in the church building on Sunday. Paul specifically addresses whether a follower of Jesus must additionally become a Jew. Paul asserts it is *unnecessary*.

5. Robert H. Mounce, "Galatians Introduction," in the *NIV Study Bible*, 2008 Update, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), p. 1812. In Galatians, Paul never asserts that justification comes *exclusively* from faith in Jesus. He denies that justification *requires circumcision*.

6. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 3d ed. revised (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), p. 465.

7. Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (1535), trans. by Theodore Graebner (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1949), p. 9. More than any other person, Luther's opinions dominate modern interpretation of Galatians.

8. Reformation history is not the context of Galatians. It should not govern interpretation of Paul's letters.

9. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Galatians—Introduction." <http://www.usccb.org/bible/scripture.cfm?bk=Galatians&ch=>.

This claim is false: Galatians is *not* a summary of Pauline theology. The letter to the Galatian churches addresses a particular local issue, as with every letter of Paul.¹

Consider *what Paul does not say.*

Paul denies that circumcision or keeping the law of Moses are required for salvation.

Paul does not address legalism, works-salvation, works-righteousness, austerity, rule-keeping, checklist faith, performance based spirituality, let-go-and-let-God, fatalism, libertarianism, or unmerited favor. These theories do not follow from Galatians. They are based on mistaken assumptions about Paul. They are imagined into the intent of Paul.

For example, consider what Paul says about “human effort.”

Before your eyes Jesus Christ was vividly portrayed as crucified! The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Although you began with the spirit, are you now trying to finish by *human effort*? Have you suffered so many things for nothing?—if indeed it was for nothing. Does God then give you the spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law or by your believing what you heard?²

This point about “human effort” is a *specific* claim and not a *general* one. Paul does not deny that *any human action of any kind* could ever be related to salvation in any way. He denies that *circumcision* has anything to do with eternal life. Note what is contrasted by the alternative conjunctions ‘or’ and ‘although’.

Before your eyes Jesus Christ was vividly portrayed as crucified! The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Although you began with the spirit, are you now trying to finish by human effort? Have you suffered so many things for nothing?—if indeed it was for nothing. Does God then give you the spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law or by your believing what you heard?³

Paul is not leaving the topic of the letter to make a broader point. He does not use a broader point to reinforce his argument. Paul contrasts the effectiveness of the *cross* with the power of *circumcision* and *the law of Moses*. Circumcision cannot save. The cross can. These statements are not denials that any human conduct is in any way related to salvation in any manner whatsoever.⁴

1. Although this discussion is not about the Roman letter, there are also frequent claims that it is a systematic presentation of Paul's theology. “None of Paul's other letters states so thoroughly the content of the gospel,” Walter W. Wessel, “Romans Introduction,” in the *NIV Study Bible*, 2008 Update, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), p. 1737. This claim is also *false*. Romans is also concerned primarily with conflicts between Jewish and gentile Christians.
2. Galatians 3:1-5. New English Translation (NET Bible, 2005).
3. Ibid. The choice of the NET Bible to translate σαρκί ‘flesh’ as ‘human effort’ is specious. It inserts unnecessary commentary into the translation. In context, ‘flesh’ primarily refers to the foreskin removed during circumcision. At no point does Paul pit ‘the law’ or ‘circumcision’ against ‘human effort’ in Galatians.
4. This seems incredible if you have already decided in advance what the text means. Where does Paul intimate that he is making a general point, or using a general point to support his claim? Each point denies that *circumcision* is necessary for eternal life. Paul never asserts that salvation is separate from human effort. Paul never denies that salvation requires human effort. Elsewhere in Galatians, Paul makes clear statements to the contrary. However, these topics are not the subject of Galatians 3:1-5.

Following is a better translation of the text.

You ignorant Galatians, who gave you the evil eye? Wasn't Jesus crucified right in front of your very eyes? I want to learn one thing from you: Did you receive the spirit by works of the law or a message of faith? Are you this ignorant? Are you going to finish by the flesh what was started by the spirit? Have you suffered so much for nothing? Then it is for nothing. Did he give you the spirit and work wonders among you by works of the law or the message of faith?¹

Galatians contains many statements that contrast faith in Jesus on the one hand, and circumcision and the law of Moses on the other. 'The law' means particularly the law of Moses,² and not 'law', 'standards', 'conduct', or 'rules' in general. If Paul wants to attack 'works-righteousness', or deny that any action ever has anything to do with salvation, he could explicitly do so. Instead he repeatedly denies that anyone must be circumcised or follow the law of Moses. General attacks against 'rule-keeping' are absent. Note the contrasts between the law versus faith in Jesus.

Titus was with me. He was not required to be *circumcised*, even though he was a *Greek*. Some false brothers snuck in. They arrived secretly to spy on the *freedom* we have in the messiah. They wanted to make us *slaves*.³

"Even though you are a *Jew*, you live *like a gentile* and *not a Jew*. How can you demand that the gentiles live *like Jews*?"⁴

"We *believe in Jesus* the messiah. We are *justified by faith* in the messiah, and not from *the works of the law*. No flesh is justified by *works of the law*."⁵

"By *the law*, I died to *the law*. Now I live *for God*."⁶

"I am not going to reject *God's mercy*. If righteousness comes through *the law, the messiah died* in vain."⁷

Did you receive the spirit by *works of the law* or a *message of faith*?⁸

Similarly, Abraham "*believed God*. This counted as righteousness for him." (Genesis 15:6) So, you know that *those who are faithful* are sons of Abraham. The scriptures predicted that God would make the gentiles righteous *by faith*. He proclaimed to Abraham, "All the gentiles are blessed by you" (Genesis 12:3, 18:18). So, they are blessed *by faith* together with *the faith* of Abraham. Everyone who lives by *works of the law* is under a curse.⁹

1. Galatians 3:1-5, A Translation.

2. "The law that came four hundred thirty years later does not cancel a covenant" (Galatians 3:17). "These women represent two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai." (Galatians 4:24) Paul does not mean 'law' or 'rules' in general when he references 'the law'.

3. Galatians 2:3-4. Galatians 5:1-2 also specifies that the 'yoke of slavery' is circumcision in particular (compare Acts 15:10). Freedom is release from the obligation of circumcision. Paul gives no indication that he equates slavery and rule-keeping, or freedom and rule-canceling.

4. Galatians 2:14.

5. Galatians 2:16.

6. Galatians 2:19.

7. Galatians 2:21.

8. Galatians 3:2.

9. Galatians 3:6-10.

If the inheritance was by *the law*, it was not *a promise*. God showed *mercy* to Abraham because of *a promise*.¹

Did *the law* oppose *the promise*? Definitely not. If *the law* was capable of giving life, righteousness could come from *the law*.² But scripture imprisoned everything under sin. He gave the *promise of faith* in Jesus the messiah to *those who believe*.²

Before *faith* came, *the law* guarded us. It imprisoned us until he revealed *the future faith*. *The law* was our *tutor*. It lead us to *the messiah*. Then we were justified by *faith*. After *faith* came, we do not need *a tutor* anymore.³

You are all sons of God through *faith* in the messiah, Jesus. All of you who are immersed into the messiah are clothed with the messiah. There is no *Jew* nor *Greek*.⁴

The messiah set you *free* so that you can be *free*. Stand firm. Do not be burdened again by *a yoke of slavery*.⁵

If you must be *circumcised*, *the messiah* does not benefit you at all. ³I admit again: Every *circumcised* man must obey *the entire law*. ⁴Those who are justified by *the law* are separate from *the messiah*. They left *mercy*.⁶

Neither *circumcision* nor *uncircumcision* mean anything in *the messiah*, Jesus. However, *faith* operates through love.⁷

Despite suggestions otherwise, the circumcision party is not too harsh. They are too *libertine*. They prefer circumcision because it helps them appear socially acceptable and thus avoid alienation.

¹²Some want to appear impressive in the flesh. They demand that you become circumcised, merely to *avoid persecution* for the cross of the messiah.⁸

The Galatian churches struggle with *libertine* sinful excess and infighting. There is no sign of harshness.

You were invited to freedom, brothers. Just do not let your freedom be *an opportunity for the flesh*. ... Live by the spirit. Never fulfill *the lust of the flesh*.⁹

If you *bite* and *devour each other*, look out. *Do not consume each other*.¹⁰

Paul is not combating rule-keeping or austerity.¹¹ He combats those who require Christians to become Jews.

1. Galatians 3:18.

2. Galatians 3:21-22.

3. Galatians 3:23-25.

4. Galatians 3:26-28.

5. Galatians 5:1. Paul calls circumcision 'slavery' earlier (Galatians 2:3-4). Luke also compares circumcision to a 'yoke' (Acts 15:10).

6. Galatians 5:2-4.

7. Galatians 5:6.

8. Galatians 6:12. Compare Galatians 5:11. Contrast with Galatians 1:10.

9. Galatians 5:13, 16.

10. Galatians 5:15.

11. Those who view Galatians as a systematic theology often claim that the letter is a polemic against austerity and rule-keeping. Paul never mentions or alludes to these problems. This is notable since he does not seem hesitant to speak his mind or name his concerns.

Paul insists that faith requires deliberate, conscious, righteous conduct.

Paul *affirms* that faith includes deliberate, conscious, righteous conduct. Paul *denies* that faith requires circumcision or keeping the law of Moses.

Faith includes deliberate action for Paul personally.

By the law, I died to the law. Now *I live for God*.¹

Freedom requires obedience to biblical commands.

Just *do not let your freedom* be an opportunity for the flesh. *Serve* each other with love. The law is fulfilled in one statement, which is, “*Love your neighbor like yourself*” (Leviticus 19:18).²

Freedom requires deliberately denying certain conduct.

The flesh desires against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh. They oppose each other. *You must do* what you do not want to do.³

Indulgence results in condemnation. Spiritual conduct produces eternal life.

The conduct of the flesh is obvious. ... Those who conduct themselves like this *will not inherit God's kingdom*.⁴

The man who sows in the flesh *will reap destruction* by the flesh. The man who sows in the spirit *will reap eternal life* by the spirit.⁵

Obedience involves deliberate, personal, willful action.

Watch yourself. Make sure that you are not tempted. ... *Each man must test* his own conduct.⁶

Paul does not reject rule-keeping. Galatians contains plenty of rule-keeping demands.

It is always good to *be enthusiastic* for good things.⁷

Just *do not let your freedom* be an opportunity for the flesh.⁸

Serve each other with love.⁹

Love your neighbor like yourself.¹⁰

If you bite and devour each other, *look out. Do not consume* each other.¹¹

1. Galatians 2:19.

2. Galatians 5:13-14, which cites Leviticus 19:18.

3. Galatians 5:17.

4. Galatians 5:19-21. This text contains a long list of vices that threaten expulsion from the kingdom of God. It contradicts the notion that conduct is unrelated to eternal life.

5. Galatians 6:8. This also contradicts the notion that conduct and eternal life are mutually exclusive.

6. Galatians 6:1, 6:4.

7. Galatians 4:18.

8. Galatians 5:13.

9. Galatians 5:13.

10. Galatians 5:14 cites Leviticus 19:18.

11. Galatians 5:15.

The conduct of the flesh is obvious. ... *Those who conduct themselves like this* will not inherit God's kingdom.¹

We must conform to the spirit.²

Do not be boastful. Do not provoke each other. *Do not envy* each other.³

A spiritual person *must restore* him gently.⁴

Carry each other's burdens.⁵

Each man *must test* his own conduct.⁶

Each person *must carry* his own load.⁷

As we have the opportunity, *we do good* for everyone, but especially for the household of faith.⁸

From now on, *no one should cause me any trouble*.⁹

Paul even calls rejection of circumcision a 'rule' of behavior.

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything. A new creation is what matters. May he grant peace and mercy to everyone who conforms to *this rule*.¹⁰

Some may object: "These are not rules. They are just spiritual principles." Read them again. They *are* rules.

The faith-only crowd epitomizes misinterpretation of Galatians. They claim,

Faith is the conviction that something is true. To believe in Jesus is to be convinced that He guarantees everlasting life to all who simply believe in Him for it.¹¹

They deny that conduct has anything to do with faith or eternal life.

No act of obedience, preceding or following faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, such as commitment to obey, sorrow for sin, turning from one's sin, baptism or submission to the Lordship of Christ, may be added to, or considered part of, faith as a condition for receiving everlasting life.¹²

According to Paul, conduct does affect eternal life, both positively and negatively.¹³

1. Galatians 5:19-21.

2. Galatians 5:25.

3. Galatians 5:26.

4. Galatians 6:1.

5. Galatians 6:2.

6. Galatians 6:4.

7. Galatians 6:5.

8. Galatians 6:10.

9. Galatians 6:17.

10. Galatians 6:15-16.

11. Grace Evangelical Society promotes the faith-alone concept, <http://www.faithalone.org/about/beliefs.html>. However, faith is more than accurately acknowledging the identity of Jesus. There is no biblical statement that equates 'simple belief' with 'faith', expressly or by implication.

12. Ibid. Note that this claim references no biblical text because the concept is not found in scripture. Against this perspective, Paul warns the Galatians that engaging in certain behaviors results in condemnation (Galatians 1:8-9, 5:19-21). He says that what a person sows determines eternal life (Galatians 6:7-8). Doing good is an expression of sowing (Galatians 6:9).

13. See the previous discussion of Galatians 5:19-21, 6:8. Paul explicitly claims that eternal life is in part a product of conduct.

Galatians asserts that Abraham is a righteous model.

Similarly, Abraham “believed God. This counted as righteousness for him.”¹

But how did Abraham get this credit? It was both because he believed that God would give him a son, but also because he was *willing to sacrifice* this special son on the altar.² Abraham’s ‘belief’ is meaningless without the associated conduct. Furthermore, belief alone is still conduct, although an insufficient one for salvation.

Faith is far more than just “the conviction that something is true.”

Paul affirms that salvation requires human effort. He denies that salvation includes circumcision or keeping Moses’s law.³

Proper interpretation follows from accurately identifying the original context.

Criticizing popular misrepresentations about Galatians may cause consternation for some. Do not feel frustration. Read the letter on its own merits. Do not read illegitimate presuppositions into the letter.

This letter concerns (a) requiring circumcision and keeping the law of Moses, versus, (b) having faith in Jesus as savior without resorting to circumcision or keeping the law of Moses.

Only when divorced from its original context does this letter appear to address rule-keeping, legalism, works-righteousness, et cetera.

This serves as a warning against forcing a presupposition onto the text, no matter how many people do it, nor how many times it is repeated. Alternatively, read from the original situation in its own setting as intended by the original author. Do not read modern circumstances into the text. Instead, only make applications clearly warranted by the text.

1. Galatians 3:6, citing Genesis 15:6.
2. Genesis 22:1-12.
3. Galatians 3:1-5.