

A Study in Galatians (5:3)

Happy Sabbath to everyone. This week's study, based on a Galatians study from the book *Lessons on Faith*, is actually an examination of the meaning of a single verse. Having read through A. T. Jones' commentary, I certainly agree with his thoughts on what the Scripture – Galatians 5:3 – means, but I would also like to add some thoughts of my own, which are the result of my own experiences in the CSDA Church, and with the life of Victory given to every believer by Yahshua.

Let us begin, then:

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“For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law.”
[Galatians 5:3]

“Debtor to do the whole law.” It is curious that many, in considering this statement, have made it mark a distinction between two laws and have made it exclude the law of God from the subject under consideration by allowing to the word “debtor” only the sense of “obligation.”

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To set the stage here, Jones is discussing one of the common (mis)-uses of this verse, which you may have heard before, that the 10 Commandments were “for the Jews,” and not the entire world, and that those who insist on being guided by the Decalogue might as well be insisting on circumcision, as the first-century Hebrew converts did.

Jones finds it curious that the verse is so used; but it has been our experience, all of us, I am sure... that those who seek to avoid the claims of obedience that Yah has upon mankind will grab just about any conceivable understanding or interpretation that serves to strengthen their desires. This is something that I suggest we, ourselves, watch for. It may seem like a good idea to firmly grasp and publicize any bit of evidence that “proves” our convictions to be right, but if we are not careful we can end up courting embarrassment.

I am thinking, specifically, of those Adventist groups, particularly the independent ones, that will publish any least whisper of “news” that mentions something that could, potentially, indicate something about legislation and Sunday. This is immediately blown up in huge headlines and circulated as “Proof that the Sunday Law is almost here!” All this spectacle does is further desensitize those who read what are essentially “Adventist tabloids” month after month, so that when they are presented by the very real, but very subtle, threat that SDA Trademark law represents, it is completely foreign to their expectations, perhaps even more-so than those in the mainstream Church.

Of course, Jones may be merely establishing the situation to prepare his audience for his discussion to follow... but I find it a useful statement to illustrate a point: it may be curious, but it is certainly not “uncommon,” that unsanctified people will use any interpretation or even rumor to support their predetermined conclusions. As a result, they will jump on the “bandwagon” without first checking their facts (the pope can't possibly have done ALL those things that independent Adventists accuse him of, for example) – and we must ensure that we

ourselves are clear of such practices, for we know that bearing false witness, even against the ungodly, is nevertheless sin, as is exaggeration, which is so common an element in this practice.

We continue:

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They know, by the scripture, that it is the whole duty of man to fear God and keep His commandments. They know that there cannot be any other scripture to contradict that. They know that every man is under obligation to keep the whole law of God, whether he is circumcised or uncircumcised. And, allowing that this term implies only obligation-- that if he is circumcised, he is under obligation to do the whole law, they conclude that this must exclude the law of God; they conclude that it must be some law that no person is under any obligation to do unless he be circumcised and that therefore the "whole law" here under consideration must be only the whole ceremonial law of sacrifices and offerings.

On the other hand, there are those who hold themselves under no obligation whatever to keep the law of God, who bring in this text to support them in their disobedience and opposition. They will have it that only those who are circumcised are under any obligation to keep the law of God, and that it is only by being circumcised that the obligation comes, and they know that they are not under any obligation to be circumcised. From this they argue that they are under no obligation to keep the ten commandments.

[endquote]

Of course, we can demonstrate this latter supposition to be false. We have articles, such as the one entitled "Before Sinai," that shows that those who know Yah have always respected the 10 Commandments, even before the record in stone was given to Moses, and many also before there even was such a thing as "circumcision." But there is a common error to both the positions that Jones is discussing, as he says below:

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But both of these are wrong; both of them fail to see the thought that is in this verse. And the cause of this failure is in their allowing to the word "debtor" only the sense of "obligation."

It is true that the word signifies "obligation." But in this place and in every other place in its connection with men's moral obligations, the word has a meaning so much broader and deeper than that of mere obligation that the sense of mere obligation becomes really secondary.

The word "debtor" in this verse--Gal. 5:3--signifies not only that a person is in debt and under obligation to pay but that, beyond this, he is overwhelmingly in debt, with nothing at all wherewith to pay. If a man is debtor and so under obligation to pay one thousand dollars and yet has abundance or even only the ability to pay the one thousand dollars that is easy enough. But if a man is debtor and so under obligation to pay fourteen millions of dollars (\$14,000,000) and has not a single cent wherewith to pay and is in prison besides and has no ability whatever to make a cent wherewith to pay his debt to that man the word "debtor" signifies a great deal more than mere "obligation to pay."

And that is precisely the case here. That is the thought in this verse. That is the meaning embodied here in the word “debtor.” This because the word “debtor,” when used in connection with morals, implies and can imply only sin, that the man is a sinner.

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So Jones’ conclusion on this matter is that, by saying that the circumcised one is a “debtor” to the law, this does not merely mean that he is under an obligation to “keep” it. It also means that he is “guilty” of it, because sin has made the penalty subscribed by the law, the end that they deserve. As I have said, I have a still further understanding of Galatians 5:3 that I will share shortly.

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This word “debtor” in Gal. 5:3 is precisely the word that is used in Luke 13:4. “Those eighteen, upon whom the tower of Siloam fell and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem?”--where the word “sinners” in the text is “debtors” in the margin.

It is the word used in the Lord’s prayer (Matt. 6:12), “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” and which in Luke’s version of the prayer plainly expresses the thought of sin in the words: “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone that is indebted to us.” Luke 11:4.

It is the same word also that is used by the Savior in Luke 7:41, 42: “There was a certain creditor which had two debtors, the one owed five hundred pence and the other fifty. And when they had nothing [with which] to pay, he frankly forgave them both.”

It is the same word also that is used in the parable in Matt. 18:23-35. Indeed, from the verse, Luke 13:4, where the word “sinners” is used in the text and “debtors” in the margin, the reference is direct to this parable in Matthew 18. That is the parable in which it is said that when a certain king “had begun to reckon” with his servants, “one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents”--about fourteen million four hundred thousand dollars--and he had nothing with which to pay. Then the Lord “forgave him the debt.” But when the servant found one of his fellow servants who owed him about fifteen dollars, he would not forgive him the debt but cast him into prison until he should pay the fifteen dollars. Then the king called up his debtor “and delivered him to the tormentors till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my Heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not everyone his brother their trespasses.” Matt. 18:23-35.

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It is certainly true that the word for “debtor” is used in the sense of “transgressor” in all these verses. The meaning is also certainly valid, that anyone who believes that circumcision will justify him is guilty, and not of violating the letter of the law (for the letter of the old covenant associated with the law indeed instructs circumcision) but of the spirit, for they do not have a complete picture of Yah’s character, nor the nature of faith.

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That thought of delivering the debtor to the tormentors until he should pay all that was due to his lord belongs with the word, for “the use of the word involves the idea that the debtor is one that must expiate his guilt.” And “sin is called ‘opheilema,’ because it involves expiation and the payment of it as a debt, by punishment and satisfaction.”

From these scriptures the attentive reader can begin to see that in the words of Gal. 5:3-- “he is debtor to do the whole law”--there is far more suggested than that he is merely under obligation to accept the claims of the law upon him and do his best to meet them. All this shows that he is not only under obligation to recognize the binding claims of the law of God but that he is actually debtor to render to that law all the claims that it has upon him. And in this it is further shown that, of himself, he must everlastingly be debtor, because he has absolutely nothing wherewith to pay, and of himself has no means of acquiring anything with which to pay. And this indebtedness lies not only in his obligation to do the law from this time forward; it also lies in obligation to make satisfaction for all that is past--for all the accumulations of the past up to the present time.

Accordingly, of himself, every man is everlastingly as debtor in all that is implied in this thought in Gal. 5:3 and the kindred texts that we have here cited, because “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” And whosoever would be circumcised in order to be saved and thus seek to be saved by works of self-righteousness, thereby takes upon himself the obligation to pay to the law of God his whole debt from the beginning of his life unto the end of it. And in that he also takes upon himself the obligation to expiate all the guilt attaching to his transgressions and accumulated thereby.

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What this means is that the claims of the law are binding and decisive. It is much the same way with human laws. If one has violated a law by, for example, stealing, he cannot undo the guilt of that violation with subsequent good acts. He may contribute all that he has stolen to charity, and in fact, give more than he has taken to a good cause. He may save a life, and prevent others from having their possessions stolen. But all this, in fact, will do nothing to make him less guilty of his crime.

Last week, we spoke about works-based religions, and the idea that we can somehow “balance the scales” is a vital component of these false pictures of Yah. If we can say enough prayers, the reasoning goes, and be devout enough in our rituals... if we can fill our lives with good deeds, then, perhaps, God will overlook our sins and let us into Heaven. I see two major things wrong with this reasoning.. and a number of minor ones as well.

First, this picture of Yahweh, and the spiritual world, is lifted directly from paganism. In the Egyptian religion, for example, at the end of someone’s life his heart was placed on a scale on the spiritual plane. The other platter of the scale had a feather. If the man’s conscience was clear – and it was made clearer, and thus “lighter” by having lived a “good life” – then it would be lighter than the feather and the deceased would go on to a reward.

The other major problem this has is that it entirely eliminates the need for Christ. If we, by our own works, are able to balance the scales, and the Father thus overlooks our sins, what purpose did the cross actually have? Some might try to incorporate it by saying that Christ’s suffering

replaces ours for those who balance the scales. Others might say that it drew the Father's attention to us, that His Son would become like us and thus keep the law. However they phrase it or understand it, however, the Son's death is not as important as the Father's decision – but the Gospel tells us that Christ Himself has been made Judge, and that His acceptance of us has nothing to do with balancing any scales, but in recognizing – as Jones says – that we have no hope of paying what we owe, of balancing our debt. And, in that recognition, we allow death to claim us, so that we can be born again as another, new creation, with no debt to pay – but also no inclination to incur NEW debt... which is why “whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin,” because the new life, consisting of mutual abiding in Christ and He in us, does not include being subject to the power of sin or temptation.

So the point being made here is well-taken. If a man is a debtor to the law, it does not mean that he must “keep” it, but that he owes a debt that can never be paid... and our only hope for justification must come through faith in Another, in Christ Himself.

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That is what it is to be “debtor to do the whole law.” That is what is stated in the words, “I testify again to every man that is circumcised that he is a debtor to do the whole law.” He is not only debtor but by that transaction he himself voluntarily assumes of himself to discharge all that is involved in his indebtedness.

Now it is true that every man in the world is, of himself, that kind of a debtor. It is also true that any man today who seeks justification by his own works, even in the doing of the ten commandments or of anything else that the Lord has commanded does thereby assume and bind himself to pay all that is involved in the indebtedness. But he cannot pay. There is not with him the first element of any possibility, in himself, to pay any of the debt. He is overwhelmed and lost.

But thanks be to God, whosoever has the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ, whosoever depends only on the Lord Jesus and that which Jesus has done, though he be of himself debtor just like any other man, yet, in Christ, he has wherewith abundantly to pay all the indebtedness. Christ has expiated by punishment and satisfaction all the guilt of every soul and by the righteousness of God which he brings, Christ supplies abundance of righteousness to pay all the demands that the law may ever make in the life of him who believes in Jesus.

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I quite appreciate the statement that Christ does not only bring forgiveness, and grace, but He also “supplies abundance of righteousness.” He gives us His own righteousness, which can never be overcome by evil, and in so doing we overcome even as He overcame, as it is written in Revelation.

But in this generation, I would propose a further understanding of Galatians 5:3. Let me quote, not only Galatians 5:3, but the verses around it as well. We read:

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to

do the whole law. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit wait for the hope of righteousness by faith.” (Gal 5:1-5)

One of the things that does not fully satisfy me about what we’ve looked at so far this week is that circumcision does not really make one any MORE guilty of the law than one who is not. It is true, there is a danger in believing that circumcision makes one justified, so that there is less, or no, need to rely on Christ.

What I would suggest is that we look at the word “debtor” in yet another way. First, it is important to understand that nothing Yah has ever given to mankind has been a burden, a curse or a trap. We know that the commandments, specifically, were given to us to be a blessing. And even the ceremonial law, which we do not obey in the letter under the New Covenant, was a blessing to those who received it and respected it before the cross.

Furthermore, Paul tells us what the purpose of the law actually is earlier on in the same book: “Wherefore then [serveth] the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator.” (Gal 3:19) Note that [serveth] was added by translators. As we may have examined in a previous study, Paul is asking, “Why is there the law?” And he answers that it was added because of sins. Specifically, Paul says the Law is “our schoolmaster [to bring us] unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.” (verse 24)

This is from the same book, and is discussing the same topic. The law was added, given to us, to be a “schoolmaster.” It is a teacher of not only our own guilt, but also of what the standard of righteousness is. The Law teaches us about our Father in Heaven. David said that “The law of Yahweh is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of Yahweh is sure, making wise the simple.” (Psa 19:7)

It is not mere obedience that accomplishes this. The simple act of not-stealing or not-murdering does not make the simple wise. However, by meditating upon the Law, by contemplating the requirements of the commandments, and the way that we treat one another when it is obeyed, this tells us much about the One who gave us those laws... and knowledge of the Lawgiver indeed leads to wisdom.

Those who are of the circumcision, the Jews of Paul’s day, grew up with the Law. There were, in a sense, in a “special class” with relation to knowledge of doctrine. Paul again, says, “Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy boast of God, And knowest His will, and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law; and art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness, etc.” (Rom 2:17-19)

There is a tendency among nominal Christians to take this as a list of disadvantages that Paul is naming. However, they are only disadvantages if their presence leads to pride and self-sufficiency. Which of the above is a bad thing? Knowing Yah’s will? Resting in the law? Being instructed out of the Law? Of course, Paul was saying that these things would not save the one who puts his confidence of everlasting life in these things.... but the things themselves are not bad. It is not a coincidence that all of the first converts were Jews – they knew the law

well enough that, when their understanding of the meaning was corrected, everything else began to fall into place.

When the gentiles were converted, they were sent to the synagogues to learn of the Law of Moses. This was no frivolous instruction, it was vital to the understanding of Christ's ministry that they become familiar with the law. The Jews, of course, already "owed" much of their knowledge of Christ and Yah's character to their knowledge of the law. The only problem – the only thing to correct – was how this knowledge affected their level of dependency on the Savior.

The problem is in trying to be "justified by the law," and in becoming circumcised in the thought that this is how to be made right with the Father. But knowledge of the law, and obedience to the law, is no disadvantage. The knowledge of the law actually teaches us of Yah's spirit and character, and in THAT sense, we are all "debtors" to the law, for we take advantage of this benefit, just as we are "debtors" to Christ who has taken our place under its penalty.

As Jones concludes:

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"Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift of the unsearchable riches of Christ. Oh, believe it! Oh, receive it! Poor, overwhelmed, lost "debtor," "buy of me gold tried in the fire that thou mayest be rich and white raiment that thou mayest be clothed." "Yea, come, buy . . . without money and without price."

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