

Law and Grace: Getting The Difference Straight

Author: [Skip Moen](#)

Today I received an passionate request to explain why my teaching about law and grace was causing such terrible consequences for a particular person. Accompanying this request was an article by Dan Corner titled “Deadly Galatianism Reintroduced.” With an English construction like that, I just had to take a look. Unfortunately, Mr. Corner’s misunderstanding of the Scriptural issue in Galatians makes his argument invalid, but since his position is so frequently espoused, I thought it would be worthwhile to demonstrate *why* the New Testament text does not say what he claims it says. By the way, Mr. Corner is not in the corner alone. Many well-known Christian writers would endorse his view. That doesn’t make the position right. It just makes the reading audience confused. The real problem with Mr. Corner’s view is its re-interpretation of the words of the New Testament authors *and* the necessity to ignore some of the text entirely.

In this brief analysis, I will not bother you with textual references. Once you understand what is happening, you can easily check the references for yourself – a much better way to learn than simply being told.

Mr. Corner says, “Certainly one of the biggest controversies in New Testament Christianity centered around **the necessity of Gentiles being circumcised for salvation. Along with that unholy concept went the belief that the Jewish holy days and Sabbaths as well as the dietary laws were to be observed, as in Moses’ day.** This not only became the subject of the Jerusalem church council (Acts 15), but different sections of the New Testament itself were also later written to correct this major problem and false, *deadly* teaching.”

Let’s carefully consider this opening statement. First, New Testament “Christianity” is an anachronism, that is, it is the use of the concept in one era that does not exist until a later era. It’s like saying that Pharaoh checked his day-timer to see if he had an appointment with Moses. There weren’t any day-timers in the 12th Century BC, just as there weren’t any “Christians” in the 1st Century AD. Those who believed that Yeshua was the Messiah called themselves followers of “the Way” and they were considered a sect of *Judaism*. The term “Christian” was a slur, an insult, used by opponents of the Way. It was not adopted as a designation of the followers of Yeshua until after the age of the apostles. So, clearly no one in the New Testament thought of themselves as members of a new religion called “Christianity.” To suggest that they did is to read our concept *back into the text*. In the first century, followers of Yeshua were *Jewish* or proselytes to Judaism. They were not Christians as we understand the term today. Making this distinction clear is critical since it is very easy to slip all kinds of subsequent theological developments into the mouths of the New Testament authors if we begin by calling them Christians.

Second, Mr. Corner's claim that the biggest controversy about the Gentiles centered around circumcision as a necessity for salvation is just wrong. No Jew believed that circumcision *saved!* Salvation was an act of grace by God. It has always been an act of grace by God. It has nothing to do with the actions of men. Paul makes this abundantly clear in Romans 4 with his analysis of imputed righteousness to Abraham, but Paul isn't the only one who drives home this distinction. Habakkuk is a paradigm example in the Old Testament. The righteous man by faith shall live. We could provide reference after reference from the Old Testament validating this point, but the fact that Paul uses the Old Testament as the basis of his argument in Romans is proof enough. Circumcision doesn't save. It has never saved, and every Jew who understood Torah knew this. In fact, if circumcision saved then sacrifice would have been unnecessary. But clearly sacrifice was necessary. Circumcised men offered sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins. Why would they do that if circumcision saved them? This gross misunderstanding of the place of grace and circumcision leads to all kinds of exegetical errors, as you can well imagine.

The issue in Galatians is not about salvation. It is about *becoming Jewish*. Let's paint the picture. With the announcement of Peter in Acts 2, God makes it abundantly clear that He is calling Gentiles to Him. This, of course, was to be the purpose of God's election of Israel in the first place. They were supposed to be a nation of priests (Exodus). Now God reminds them of their obligation to become the vehicle for reaching the nations. The prophet Joel delivered this message centuries before Peter understood it. On the day of Peter's great sermon (an anachronism), 3000 *devout* men (that is, men who were already Torah-observant) recognized Yeshua as their Messiah and became followers of the Way. They did not become Christians. They remained Jewish but they now accepted Yeshua as the Jewish Messiah. But soon many Gentiles joined the community of the Messianic Jews. Some of these Gentiles came into the community without fulfilling the previously-expected rituals associated with Judaism, in particular, circumcision. This created an enormous problem. In the past, Jewish legalists taught that in order to be a member of the community that worshipped YHWH, the God of Israel, a man had to make every effort to become like a Jew. Of course, this meant being circumcised. So, proselytes would normally be circumcised, baptized and take on all the cultural aspects of the Jewish way of life as much as they could. Obviously, they could not be *born* Jewish, but they could emulate and adopt Jewish practices. When Gentiles began to enter the community of the Way, some legalists taught that these Gentiles must become Jewish in culture and practice in order to be part of the community. The issue was not about salvation. It was about who was acceptable as a member of the community.

Paul argues that these legalists are wrong. Salvation is a gift of grace. It does not require circumcision. Nor is it necessary to become Jewish in order to belong to God's household. This is the clear message to Peter at the house of Cornelius, a Roman Gentile. God chooses, not Man. No man is allowed to place conditions on whom God chooses. Paul's argument is that the *additional* requirement to become Jewish in order to be accepted into the Kingdom is tragically mistaken. It is Jewish legalism. It is to be rejected. Gentiles are accepted into the Kingdom on exactly the same basis as Jews – by grace (see Habakkuk).

What this means for our discussion is that Paul is not rejecting the necessity of Torah-observance. He is rejecting the claim that a man must become Jewish before God accepts him. Jew and Gentile, according to Paul, come into the Kingdom on exactly the same basis. But this does not entail that Paul rejects the observance of Torah. Since Torah observance (keeping Sabbath, following dietary regulations, etc.) has nothing to do with salvation, claiming that salvation is by grace alone *does not eliminate* the need for Torah observance. That would be like saying that since I have cruise control it is unnecessary to have a brake pedal. The two are related, but they have entirely different purposes.

Mr. Corner does not see this (obvious) distinction. He has forgotten most of his Old Testament. He ignores the words of the prophets, including Moses, on the subject of grace. He is apparently unaware that the Old Testament consistently teaches that salvation is the operation of grace, not works. Furthermore, he must ignore Paul's claim to be a Torah observant, practicing Jew, a claim which he makes nearly 20 years after his experience on the Damascus road. He must re-read Peter's rejection of unclean food in the vision on the rooftop. If Peter were a "Christian," why would he adamantly refuse to eat? Finally, Mr. Corner would have to reinterpret James' comments in Acts 15 when he proclaims that there are thousands who follow Yeshua and they are *zealous* for Torah. By confusing salvation and Law, Mr. Corner proclaims that there is only *one* purpose for Scripture – to get someone saved. This mistake invalidates all of God's instructions about righteous living, that is, how we conduct ourselves *after* we experience God's electing grace. So, Mr. Corner lumps all Scripture into one category and as a result, when he rejects circumcision as a means to salvation, he ends up throwing out all instruction in righteous living too. Are we to assume that the Ten Commandments no longer apply because we are now under "grace"? Did God change His mind about what it means to live according to His word after Yeshua died on the cross? If God did change His mind, then why do Paul, Peter and James continue to observe Torah living *and* expect others to do the same? If Yeshua is our model for life, are we about to claim that He was *not* Torah observant?

Mr. Corner claims that later New Testament documents were written to overcome the "deadly" teaching about following Jewish practices. But Mr. Corner's claim is hollow. Of course no New Testament author asserts we must follow Jewish practice *in order to be saved*. Jews didn't even believe that! The issue is whether or not someone can be used by God in His Kingdom without becoming Jewish. If you carefully study the entire Bible, you will find the answer is "Yes" as far back as Hagar, who was *not* Jewish. Throwing out the way of righteous living because one cannot see beyond the "getting to heaven" objective is heresy of the first degree. Would Mr. Corner be content for me to say that I am under grace and therefore allowed to determine for myself how I will live? Of course not. Every Christian leader claims that God expects us to live according to His Word, but unfortunately most Christian leaders seem to think that God's Word begins with Matthew. Mr. Corner needs to read his Bible, not his church doctrines.