

# Galatians 3:3 in the Navajo Bible

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Ha'át'íí lá yówééh át'éego doo ádahosoot'yaad da! Da' Nítch'i Diyinii bee nínáádanihi'dizhchíigo dahisidoonaadgo k'adísh éí bee haz'áanii bik'eh hól'í bee hadaalt'é ída'dohnééh lá? (Galatians 3:3)<sup>1</sup>

Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? (Galatians 3:3)<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

The reader might have noticed that, where the English says "by human effort," the Navajo has *bee haz'áanii bik'eh hól'í bee* ("by obeying the law"). The Greek here is *sarki* ("flesh"). The Navajo rendering comes close, but is interpretative nonetheless. Paul's use of the term "law" in Galatians is rich and deep. He's saying a lot. In fact he is saying so much that he could easily be misunderstood.

## The Law in Galatians

Elsewhere I've discussed the problem of adding comments to the text as part of the process of translating. Ideally one would translate in a way that conveys ideas to the modern reader which are equivalent to those the first readers would have drawn from the original text. Such a translation must have a human face. But one must also bear in mind that it is the text we are translating, not our presuppositions. There is a constant danger of being either too literal (missing the author's point in a tangle of words) or too free (going beyond original intent). Translating is an art, not a science. So let us give the Navajo translators this latitude. But here some of their choices work against us.

### Paul's primary focus

When Paul says "law" in Galatians, he is focusing on one narrow aspect of law, and yet his thoughts also bleed over into broadly based general principles. Adding *Jew dine'é bi-* ("Jewish") (*Da' Jew dine'é bibee haz'áanii bik'eh dahonoł'ínígíish binahjí' Nítch'i Diyinii nihee dahazlúí, . . .* /Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, . . .) is only helpful up to a point. In the same way, the Navajo rendering of vs. 3 is not wholly out of place, but could be criticized for being overly interpretative.

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<sup>1</sup> Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> English Bible quotations are from *The Holy Bible: New International Version®*. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.

Let us come to the heart of the matter. Paul's focus in Galatians is not on Sabbath keeping. It is on circumcision. This is the central issue in his mind as he writes. If there is any doubt on this point, consider the following verses.

Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. (Galatians 2:3)

Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. (Galatians 2:12)

Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. (Galatians 5:2)

Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. (Galatians 5:3)

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. (Galatians 5:6)

Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. (Galatians 5:11)

Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. (Galatians 6:12)

Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh. (Galatians 6:13)

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. (Galatians 6:15)

In these nine passages Paul uses the words "circumcised," "uncircumcised," "circumcision," and so on. Along with them we might add one more, although it does not specifically include a form of the word in question: "As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!" (Galatians 5:12). Clearly this is a related thought! So this tenth verse should be included with the other nine as we seek to understand what Paul was trying to get across.

The problem in Galatia was that certain Jewish Christians from the church in Jerusalem were traveling around the province trying to get Gentile Christians to be circumcised, in effect transforming them into Jews, as though this would bring them any closer to Christ. Anyone who responds as Paul does in Galatians 5:12 (quoted above) is clearly writing in a highly focused way. This is what he's focused on – circumcision.

## Broader principles

What Paul says about the one problem at hand, however, follows from principles that can be applied much more broadly. If one's heart is not right with God, that does not keep a person from pretending. Merely going through the motions of keeping any law – even a law that is clearly still binding, such as the law not to murder – produces a worthless, works oriented religion of externals.<sup>3</sup> Jesus tells us that if we hate someone in our hearts, the act of killing him has not yet occurred, but we are already subject to judgment (see Matt 5:21-22). We have performed the act in our hearts. It is the same with adultery. Acts that we perform in our hearts are real and God will judge us for them.

So the Ten Commandments, and any other laws, however good they may be, fall within the scope of Paul's argument. Is he saying, then, that we should no longer obey the Ten Commandments? I hope no one will think so.

## What point is Paul making?

Let us start with a clarification. A point Paul is not making in his letter to the Galatians is that circumcision is somehow inherently wrong. It is only when circumcision – or anything else – competes with faith that it becomes wrong. Babies are routinely circumcised today for medical reasons. This has nothing whatever to do with Paul's argument. But if someone submits to circumcision in order to be saved, he has fallen from grace (see Galatians 5:4). Under those conditions circumcision is wrong, but in and of itself it is simply irrelevant.

The problem in Galatia was that people were travelling from church to church and they claimed that circumcision was not irrelevant at all, but absolutely necessary for salvation. They said no man could be saved without it and this put circumcision on the same level as faith in regard to obtaining salvation. This was a serious distortion of the gospel and Paul was entirely right to oppose such teachers.

Summarizing, I have argued that Paul was talking primarily about circumcision in his letter to the Galatians and that circumcision becomes wrong only when it competes with faith. In opposing circumcision Paul states himself so strongly that one could think it is necessary to disobey God in order to please Him. This is not true at all! I have already referred to Galatians 5:6 and 6:15. I now repeat these verses for convenience and add one other to the list. In each case the second clause is the one of special interest.

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<sup>3</sup> "There are those who profess to serve God, while they rely upon their own efforts to obey His law, to form a right character, and secure salvation. Their hearts are not moved by any deep sense of the love of Christ, but they seek to perform the duties of the Christian life as that which God requires of them in order to gain heaven. *Such religion is worth nothing.* When Christ dwells in the heart, the soul will [45] be so filled with His love, with the joy of communion with Him, that it will cleave to Him; and in the contemplation of Him, self will be forgotten. Love to Christ will be the spring of action. Those who feel the constraining love of God, do not ask how little may be given to meet the requirements of God; they do not ask for the lowest standard, but aim at perfect conformity to the will of their Redeemer. With earnest desire they yield all and manifest an interest proportionate to the value of the object which they seek. A profession of Christ without this deep love is mere talk, dry formality, and heavy drudgery" (Ellen White, *Steps to Christ*, pp. 44-45, emphasis added).

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. (Galatians 5:6)

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. (Galatians 6:15)

Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God. (1 Corinthians 7:19)

First Paul says, "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." In the next one he says, "what counts is a new creation." So "faith expressing itself through love" (5:6) is equivalent in Paul's mind to the idea of believers being "a new creation" (6:15). When we become new creatures in Christ, faith springs to life and we express it in loving ways to those with whom we come in contact. This much should be clear. No one would disagree.

What about the third verse? There Paul says, "Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God." Wait. Did we read that right? Is Paul saying we should keep the commandments of God, and that doing so is consistent with our "faith expressing itself through love," and that that in turn is consistent with us being "a new creation" in Christ? Yes, we read it right. That is exactly what he is saying. And in Galatians 3 he says nothing to contradict this.

## Discussion

If we extend Paul's discussion of circumcision in his letter to the Galatians to include, not just what God says about circumcision, but what He says on law more generally (including the Ten Commandments) – and I think it is legitimate to do this – we should include the statements he makes on this topic in all his letters. We should not stop after reading bits and pieces of what all will agree is a very intense argument. If we apply his words in Galatians to the Ten Commandments, or to any one of the Ten Commandments, we should include all of what he says in all his letters about law. We only have the whole story when we read all the verses.

I don't think for a moment that Paul wants us to break any of the commandments. But if we think he does, we enter a bizarre and twisted world where right is wrong, and wrong is right, and nothing is quite as it seems. Does Paul really want us to break one of the commandments? Why stop with one? If obedience itself is wrong – i.e., if obedience is a form of disobedience – then could it be that we are under obligation to break, not only one of the commandments, but all of them? No one would make such a claim, because the position is so extreme, but it *is* consistent with the idea that Paul wants us to remain in disobedience in order to remain under grace. James speaks to this point.

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. (James 2:10)

Perhaps in view of James 2:10 it doesn't matter which commandment we break, just so we break something and thus show that we are disobedient and therefore still

under grace. May God deliver us from such reasoning! Paul had to deal with it often. People twisted his position on grace. He quotes some of them as follows: "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (Romans 6:1-2)

The idea that we must disobey God in order to please Him does not come from the Holy Spirit. An enemy has done this. We must keep all ten of the commandments and thus show that we come to God submissively – in humility and obedience. As Paul says in a passage quoted earlier, "Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God" (1 Corinthians 7:19). Thus, in Paul's mind "keeping the commandments of God" was not only right, but important. Our obligation to God's commandments is not to break one, or break all, but to keep all. In this way, by loving Him and obeying Him from the heart, we show that we are "a new creation" (Galatians 6:15) and that God has placed within us "faith expressing itself through love" (Galatians 5:6)

## Conclusion

When Paul says "law" in his letter to the Galatians he means primarily the law about circumcision, and yet it is true that broader principles are involved. These spill over to include the way we relate with all of God's requirements, including the Ten Commandments.

In all of this please bear in mind that it is possible to obey God with a glad and thankful heart. It is not necessary to do wrong actions in order to have right attitudes. Let nothing compete with faith. Anything that does this must go. But genuine obedience does not compete with faith. Instead it illustrates and validates faith.