

The Works of the Law

We are seeing the reasons for not confining Paul's arguments only to the Jewish 'cultural' aspects of the law. The phrase 'works of the law' is not referring only to the 'ceremonial' law; and it does not refer only to the **misuse** of the law. Rather 'the works of the law' refers to the sincere keeping of the Mosaic law as a whole. We have seen some reasons for taking it this way. In addition, Paul sometimes puts his point in terms of epochs of time. He says 'the law came' ¹. This cannot mean only the ceremonial law came; he is speaking of the law as a totality. We are not justified by the works of the law. We are not justified by Jewish culture. We are not justified by the level of our obedience to the ten commandments. We are not justified by our morality. Later Paul will argue his teaching from the case of Abraham, and Abraham did not have any part of the law. He did nothing but believe the promises of God.

¹ 4:17

Justified by the faithfulness of Christ

We are justified by the faithfulness of Christ. 'We are Jews by nature... ¹, but we know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by the faithfulness of Christ, and not by the works of the law. For no one at all will be justified by the works of the law' ².

¹ 2:15

² 2:16

• Two different phrases with two different meanings - although some translations have treated them as the same

In Greek the phrases 'faithfulness of Jesus Christ' (*pisteos Iesou Christou*) and 'believed in Christ Jesus' (*eis Christoun Iesoun*) are different phrases with different meanings. Some times they are translated as if they have the same meaning. The New International Version refers to 'faith in Jesus Christ . . . faith in Christ Jesus ... faith in Christ' as if the Greek used the same phrasing three times. This was the approach of most English translations of the 19th and 20th centuries. But the translators of the old 'Authorised' or 'King James' version of the Bible took the two different phrases as having different meanings. They reckon *eis Christoun* means 'in Christ', and *pistis Christou* means 'the faith of Christ' or 'the faithfulness of Christ'. Normally I prefer modern translations to the old translation of 1611, but at this point I have to say I think 'faithfulness of Christ' is very much the best translation of the phrase *pistis Christou*. **The linguistic experts are evenly divided!** Very often in biblical study when you look into this kind of linguistic question you find the arguments on both sides are about equal, and the linguists are therefore often evenly divided among themselves! I have referred to the linguistic arguments elsewhere,¹ Ben Witherington summarises the debate,² and Richard Hays' *The Faith of Jesus Christ* now has been enlarged in a second edition³ – but here I will leave them aside! All I will say is this:

• Faith in Christ

• Faith(fullness) of Christ

• Each translation implies the other

(i) First of all the difference of opinion is not an important one. 'I live by the faithfulness of Christ' – and that is what faith in Christ is! 'I live by faith in Christ' – and I do so because He is faithful. Each translation actually implies the other one, so the dispute is not very important.

• Recent studies and translations recognise the distinction

(ii) It is notable that the major evangelical commentaries of the 1970s and 1980s (by F.F. Bruce and Fung) took *pisteos Christou* to mean 'faith in Christ'. But the major studies of the 1990s and the early years of the new millennium (Longenecker, Witherington, Eaton in *Theology of Encouragement*) take *pisteos Christou* to mean 'faithfulness of Christ'. Until recently no major translation took *pisteos Christou* to mean 'faithfulness of Christ'. but two recent translations (Today's New

International Version; the English Standard Version) now allow it as an alternative translation. It is clear, I think, that the scholarly trend is back to the old translation – ‘faith of Christ’.

• *Paul’s thrust is that salvation looks to Jesus’ faithfulness*

(iii) For me, the clinching point is a theological one. Personally I would rather entrust my salvation to Jesus’ faithfulness than to my faith! I know I have to have faith, but my faith is wobbly! Jesus’ faithfulness is constant and steady. Surely the whole thrust of Paul’s thinking is making the point that salvation looks to Jesus’ faithfulness. I do not like to trust myself to anything in myself (not even my faith!). I would rather look to Jesus’ faithfulness. The two phrases are different (*pisteos Iesou Christou ... eis Christoun Iesoun*) and I think the difference is significant. My wobbly faith is anchored to His steady and unchanging faithfulness. I live by the faithfulness of Christ! I would not like to live in any other way. I don’t have faith in my faith! I have faith in His faithfulness.



• *One Greek word is used for both faith and faithfulness*

We must remember also that the word *pistis* in Greek means both ‘faith’ and ‘faithfulness’. The Greek language has one word where the English language has two. In perfect obedience, in perfect faith, in perfect faithfulness, Jesus died for me. He paid the price, He bore the judgement of all my sins. He did what He did in perfect faith, perfect faithfulness, perfect obedience. He **still** is perfectly obedient. He **still** has perfect faith as He ever lives to intercede for me. He **still** has perfect faithfulness towards me. How amazing it all is. ‘Great God of wonders, all thy ways are matchless, God-like, and divine!’ I put my little faith into His mighty faith-and faithfulness. I do not need, or get discouraged by, the law in the Mosaic covenant. Even though the command ‘You shall not covet’ kills me, it is alright. I can have full and perfect assurance that He accepts me. I am justified – covered with the righteousness of Christ. A person ‘is *not justified by the works of the law, but by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ*’.¹

• *I put my little faith into His mighty faith & faithfulness*

• *Full and perfect assurance*

- Notes**
1. See M.A. Eaton, *Theology of Encouragement/No Condemnation* (IVCP, USA/Paternoster, UK, 1995), chapter 11.
 2. Ben Witherington’s commentary, *Grace in Galatia* (Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 178–182.
 3. See his *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Structure of Galatians 3:1 – 4:11* (Eerdmans, 2002).

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