



Romans 3:31

(31) Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law.

King James Version

Some translations, such as the *English Standard Version* and the *New International Version*, render this as, “Do we then overthrow [or nullify] the law by *this* faith?” (Emphasis ours throughout). Paul is writing about a particular application of faith, not simply belief or trust in God. He discusses the specific application in verses 21-26, which are about faith in Christ's sacrifice as the means of atonement. Putting this together, the apostle asks if trusting in Christ's sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins nullifies God's law. Then he answers his question quite firmly: Not only does this faith not overthrow the law, it actually upholds or confirms it!

Before explaining this line of thought, we must step back to consider Paul's whole song. The overriding theme of Romans 1—8 is the doctrine of justification by faith and how it applies to the Jew-Gentile divide that the early church struggled with. Chapters 9—11 then discuss the grafting of Gentiles into the Body of Christ and the current standing of physical Israelites. The final chapters discuss Christian conduct in light of the preceding doctrinal explanation.

Justification by faith simply means that we are aligned with God—justified—based on our belief in Christ's sacrifice rather than any personal worthiness. At the time, many questioned this teaching because Gentiles were entering the church with little exposure to God's instructions. The church needed to understand that justification comes from believing in Christ's sacrifice, not from obeying God's commands, which Jewish believers had traditionally emphasized. So, the question was, “How is someone accepted by God?” which leads to, “How does that relationship start?”

As a simple example, say a man tells a lie one day. The next day, though, the man does not lie or [sin](#) in any other way. In addition, he sells all he owns and gives the proceeds to charity. Yet the good he did the second day cannot pay for the whopper he told on the first. The wages for yesterday's work of the flesh must still be paid, and those wages are death ([Romans 6:23](#)). Neither perfect obedience nor charitable deeds after the fact can pay those wages. The account can only be settled with a life. So, either the sinner pays with his life, or he has faith in Christ's sacrifice as payment. Whether Jew or Gentile, we cannot approach the Father on the basis of our works because everyone falls critically and fatally short of His standard.

Yet this truth does not abolish God's standards—it only means that our diligent efforts to live up to them will not *justify* us. In the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, the man who acknowledged his sinfulness and sought mercy was justified, not the one who held up his fasting and tithing to God as a self-serving offering ([Luke 18:9-14](#)). As necessary elements of God's instruction, fasting and tithing are good things, and Christ commands them in other places (for example, Matthew 6:16-18; 9:14-15; 23:23). But they cannot pay the debt that a person owes because of his sins. *Whether in terms of obedience to the law or in charity, our works are simply our duty (see [Luke 17:10](#)), not the means of our justification.*

Being faithful to our spouse and honest with our neighbor will not justify or save us, yet we understand we are still obligated to keep those divine commands. They tell us the right way to live, and we see the significant benefit of keeping them and the tremendous harm from breaking them.

Likewise, God never intended the [fourth commandment](#) to justify us, yet keeping the seventh-day [Sabbath](#) is still part of God's commandments. God has blessed, sanctified, and hallowed the seventh day since Creation, not merely from the giving of the law on Mount Sinai ([Genesis 2:1-3](#); [Exodus 20:11](#)). The Sabbath is a necessary weekly reminder of God as Creator and Redeemer ([Exodus 20:8-11](#); [Deuteronomy 5:15](#)), both physically and spiritually and past and present/future. [Exodus 31:13](#) shows it to be the sign of sanctification that is foundational to knowing God, as well as a day for

being refreshed. The Sabbath is so vital to a relationship with God that He scattered ancient Israel primarily for breaking it ([Ezekiel 20:12-13](#), 16, 20-21, 24; 22:8, 26).

Jesus Christ's teaching and example clearly upheld the Sabbath. Aside from the first commandment, the fourth arose as a subject more often during His ministry than any other. He and the Jews never disagreed over whether the seventh-day Sabbath was holy; they only sparred over what was appropriate activity on it. The book of Acts shows the apostles and early church continued to keep the seventh day.

Yet today's nominal Christianity largely disparages the Sabbath because the Roman Catholic Church presumed to sanctify Sunday to placate sun-worshipers within the Empire. Though Protestantism rejected many Catholic practices during the Reformation, it weakly nodded to papal authority to continue this pagan tradition of men. Its later theologians twisted the Scripture to justify retaining Sunday as its day of worship.

— David C. Grabbe

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