

Is the Torah Only for the Unrighteous?
(or)
It is Often Said: The Law was Given Only to Condemn
An Investigation into 1Timothy 1:3–11

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Introduction

In the current restoration of Torah among the followers of Yeshua, we sometimes struggle to explain Paul’s teaching on the Torah. We understand Peter’s perspective when he writes:

“... just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction. (2Peter 3:15–16)

Indeed, sometimes Paul’s words are “hard to understand.” For in some cases, it appears that Paul disparages the Torah, relegating it to something that has exhausted its usefulness and has been replaced by something better. The difficulty is heightened all the more when his teaching in other places seems clearly to extol the Torah as the standard of righteous living for all of God’s people.

The text before us is just such an example. On a first reading, Paul appears to be saying that God gave the Torah for the sole purpose of condemning the unrighteous and that it has no positive application to those who are righteous:

8 But we know that the Torah is good, if one uses it properly, 9 knowing that Torah is not made for a righteous person, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers 10 and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching, 11 according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted.

Yet such an initial reading does not square with Paul’s statements elsewhere about the Torah. For instance, his assertion that the Torah is “spiritual” (Romans 7:14) surely suggests that it has a positive application to those who have been born again by the Spirit. For Paul, only believers in whom the Spirit dwells are able to appreciate spiritual realities (1Corinthians 2:9–10). How then can he say in the text before us that the “Torah is not made for a righteous person?” If we reject the point of view that Paul contradicted himself, then we must seek to understand this passage in harmony with his other teachings on the place of the Torah in the believer’s life. Moreover, since we receive Paul’s writings as the inspired word of God, we must strive to see how his teaching about the Torah in this text aligns with the rest of Scripture.

Examples of Interpretations of Paul’s Perspective on the Torah in 1Timothy 1:3–11

Commentators have generally understood this text in one of several ways:

- 1) by “law” (nomos) Paul is referring to the the Sinai covenant (the “full Law”) which was added to the Ten Commandments only after Israel sinned with the golden calf incident. Thus, when saying that “the law is not for the righteous but for the unrighteous,” Paul is referring to the

ceremonial and civil laws that were added to the moral law of the Ten Commandments.

- 2) that the Torah no longer stands as a guideline of holy living for believers in Yeshua, because a new guideline of righteousness has been supplied by the life and words of Yeshua, as taught by the indwelling Spirit of God. His words are thus understood to mean: “The Law is not for believers but for unbelievers.”
- 3) that Paul is using the term “law” (νόμος, *nomos*), not as a reference to the Torah of Moses, but as referring to the general concept of “law,” which is applicable only to criminals in human society. His words thus mean: “In human society, laws function to punish the unrighteous, not the righteous.”
- 4) that Paul is not speaking of the Torah in general, but only of one aspect of the Torah, namely, the condemning of sin and sinners. Thus his statement should be understood to mean that “the condemning work of the Torah is made, not for the righteous, but for the unrighteous.”

Irenaeus (c. 130–c. 200) comments on 1 Timothy 1:9 in his explanation of the purpose for which God gave the Torah.¹ In general, Irenaeus taught that God initially intended to give Israel only the Decalogue (Ten Words), but that after Israel sinned with the golden calf, He considered it necessary to give the complete Law in order to demonstrate Israel’s rebellion, and to reign in Israel’s wayward nature.² Irenaeus emphasizes the point that the fathers were justified without the additional laws of the Sinai covenant, but that they had the Ten Words written upon their hearts.

Why, then, did the Lord not form the [Sinai] covenant for the fathers? Because “the law was not established for righteous men.” (1 Timothy 1:9) But the righteous fathers had the meaning of the Decalogue [Ten Words] written in their hearts and souls, that is, they loved the God who made them, and did no injury to their neighbor. There was therefore no occasion that they should be cautioned by prohibitory mandates, because they had the righteousness of the law in themselves.³

Thus, the morality of the Ten Words was written on the heart of the righteous ones, while the additional laws given after the golden calf incident were intended to rebuke wayward Israel for her sin.

Clement of Alexandria (late 1st Century) also considered that the Torah was given primarily to show Israel the error of her ways, and ultimately to call all men to recognize their own sinfulness. Thus, he viewed the giving of the Torah itself as a demonstration of God’s grace, because it calls mankind to a realization of his need for a Savior by bringing upon them the dread of utter condemnation. It is in this context that Clement of Alexandria appeals to 1 Timothy 1:9 in order to prove that the mission of the Torah was that of condemning sinners.⁴ Moreover, Clement of Alexandria taught that the “Law,” given to those who were unrighteous (proven by quoting 1 Timothy 1:9), presented them with a freewill choice between right and wrong, a choice which could result in salvation. In this way, the harshness of the Law was also a mark of God’s benevolence.⁵

In a work of the 3rd Century (277 CE), called “The Acts of the Disputations with the Archheretic Manes,” attributed to Archelaus, bishop of Caschar, the Law is said to have been given in order to show the “strength of sin” (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:56). Having finished the work of revealing the true nature of sin by giving the Law, God rested (which is how Archelaus interprets the meaning of “Sabbath”). The current work of God is to reveal through spiritual (not physical) means the true nature of salvation in His Son. Once again, 1 Timothy 1:9 is brought forward to substantiate the position that the primary purpose of the Torah was to condemn sinners and to mark out the true nature of sin.⁶

Calvin’s remarks on 1 Timothy 1:5–11 are insightful. He notes that Paul is warning Timothy about how those who have rejected the gospel of Yeshua misuse the Torah. Anticipating that Timothy’s detractors would try to use the Law against the gospel, Paul reminds him “that the law gives them no support but was even opposed to them, and that it agreed perfectly with the gospel which he had

taught.”⁷ In explaining Paul’s statement of v. 9, that the “law is not made for a righteous person,” Calvin writes:

The apostle did not intend to argue about the whole office of the law, but views it in reference to men. It frequently happens that they who wish to be regarded as the greatest zealots for the law, give evidence by their whole life that they are the greatest despisers of it Paul remonstrates that the law is, as it were, the sword of God to slay them; and that neither he nor any like him have reason for viewing the law with dread or aversion; for it is not opposed to righteous persons, that is, to the godly and to those who willingly obey God.⁸

Calvin therefore sees Paul’s words in this text as applying only to one aspect of the Torah, not to its entire purpose or mission. When Paul writes that “the Law is not made for a righteous person,” he means that those who attempt to misuse the Torah are themselves condemned by it, and that *one purpose* of the Torah itself is to bring about such condemnation.

Stern, in his commentary on 1Timothy 1:9 in the *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, follows a similar line of reasoning:

So only in some of its aspects is the Torah not for a person whom God has declared righteous. In its role as that which prescribes punishment and condemnation for offenses, shows people their sinfulness and guilt before God, and guides them away from trying to prove how good they are and toward trusting in Yeshua the Messiah . . . , the Torah is for those who are heedless of Torah in its role for the righteous.⁹

Some modern commentators consider Paul’s words in 1Timothy to substantiate a dismissal of the Law as a standard of righteousness for believers. Kent is representative of this position. After noting that the goodness of the Law is found only in its proper use (1Timothy 1:8), he writes:

Hence the impropriety of applying the Law to Christians is obvious. The believer had died to the Law’s demands in the person of his substitute, Christ (“the end of the law . . . to everyone who believeth,” Romans 10:4). To bring the Law into the church at Ephesus as a guide for Christians was to miss the purpose of the Law. It was not designed to form motives of integrity. Christians have something far better: the Holy Spirit who continually guides from within.¹⁰

Others point out that the definite article is not used with the word “law” in 1Timothy 1:9, and conclude that it therefore denotes general or universal (natural) law rather than the Law of Moses.

“Law” in this verse is without the definite article and so probably refers to law in general. The apostle indicates that the purpose of the law is not to police good men, but bad men. In other words, we need law for the punishment of criminals and the protection of society. He says that law is not appointed “for good men”—literally, “for a righteous person.” Rather, it is intended to deal with those who are unrighteous.¹¹

Yet each of these explanations has its difficulties. The notion that God initially intended to give only the Ten Commandments as a moral standard, but then added the rest of the Torah due to Israel’s sin, does not square with the biblical record itself. In Romans 10:5–8, Paul teaches that the “word of faith” which he was preaching was nothing different than the Torah given by Moses (note the quote in Romans 10:8 from Deuteronomy 30:12f), so the Torah is an expression of the Gospel (cf. Galatians 3:8). God states that the laws and statutes comprised Israel’s wisdom, and that the nations around them would recognize how good these laws and statutes were (Deut 4:5f). Surely the words of Psalmist (Psalm 19; 119) extol the Torah as a most valuable possession of God’s people.

The explanation that Paul is here dealing with just one aspect of the Torah, namely, that of condemning sin and sinners, initially appears helpful, for surely the condemning ministry of the Torah applies to the unrighteous, not the righteous. But throughout the Scriptures the Torah is viewed as a

unity, especially in its capacity as a covenant. Moreover, as a unity, the Torah reveals the holiness of God, not only in its positive descriptions but also in its condemnation of sin. And such unified revelation has a direct purpose in the life of the righteous as well.

The idea that by “law” (*nomos*) Paul is not referring to the Torah but to the idea of “law” in general, does not fit the larger context. When Paul goes on to describe how the “law” is applied to the unrighteous, he clearly is using the Torah of Moses, not the concept of “natural law.” This is seen in the way that his list of sins parallels the second half of the Ten Words. Moreover, Paul often uses the word *nomos* (Law, Torah) without the article (the word “the”) to refer to the Torah of Moses (e.g., Romans 2:17, 23, 25; 1Corinthians 9:20).

The interpretation that the Torah has been replaced by the inner leading of the Spirit, and that this is why Paul teaches that the Torah “was not made for the righteous” simply does not square with Paul’s teaching elsewhere that faith does not negate but establishes the Torah (Romans 3:31), and that those who are justified fulfill the requirements of the Torah by walking according to its precepts (Romans 8:4). Paul’s teaching is that believers should keep the commandments of God (1Corinthians 7:19) as given in the Torah. Far from being replaced by the indwelling Spirit, the work of the Spirit is that of writing the Torah upon the heart.

How then are we to understand Paul’s words here? What other interpretation can be offered that reconciles Paul’s positive view of the Torah with his words that the Torah is not made for the righteous?

Looking More Closely at 1Timothy 1:3–11

In the opening paragraphs of this epistle, Paul reminds his disciple, Timothy, about his assigned task at Ephesus. Paul had left Timothy there in order to curb the false teachings of “some men” within the community. Paul only hints at the content of their “strange doctrines” (v. 3), which is literally “other teachings” (*heterodidaskalein*), the Greek word from which we derive our English “heterodoxy.” In short, they were teaching doctrines contrary to the Scriptures (which was the Tanach in Paul’s day). This contrary teaching incorporated “myths and endless genealogies” (v. 4). Paul speaks of “myths” in 1Timothy 4:7 as well: “Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness” (*ESV*). In 2Timothy 4:4, Paul speaks of those who “wander from the truth” into “myths,” while in Titus 1:14 he writes about “Jewish myths.” We do not have sufficient data to be dogmatic as to the meaning of “myths and endless genealogies,” but several options seem most probable.

First, the extant gnostic materials and references to these materials (from the early 2nd Century CE) contain teaching of a primordial world in which various beings ruled. Basilides taught that there were six spiritual beings who formed the *pleroma* (fulness), from which descended 365 angelic beings in an unbroken chain, each creating a heaven for its habitat. The lowest class of these powers was a demiurge god who created the physical world.¹² Other gnostic teachers (such as Valentinus) had different schemes of the *pleroma* and the physical world that descended from it, but in general, early gnosticism depended greatly upon mythical power figures and a chain of descent which resulted in the corrupted physical universe. Was such gnostic teaching extant in Paul’s day? While fully developed gnosticism was a product of the 2nd Century CE and later, it seems very warranted to suggest that some early forms of gnosticism were being taught in the 1st Century. Such teaching, grounded as it was upon mythic power figures and lines of descent (akin to genealogies), may well have been the source of the false doctrines about which Paul exhorts Timothy.

Secondly, we know that apocalyptic literature was very popular in Paul’s day. Once again, much of the early apocalyptic literature incorporates mythological figures, and seeks to gain credibility by tracing genealogies of the authors and main characters to biblical figures of the patriarchal age. Many of these were produced by Jewish authors and incorporate Jewish themes. It may have been that such apocalyptic works were being received by some groups as authoritative, even if they were obviously contrary to the written record of the Scriptures. It is easy to see how doctrines based upon some of these

apocalyptic works might have been the target of Paul’s polemics.

Though we do not have enough information to pinpoint the “strange doctrines” from which Timothy was to guard the believers in Ephesus, it seems most likely that they were derived from a mixture of Jewish and Greek philosophies.

Paul goes on to describe the false teaching at Ephesus as giving way to “speculation rather than the administration of God which is by faith” (v. 4). As far as Paul was concerned, the manner in which God intends His people to live is plainly given in the Scriptures—there is no need to speculate. The teaching of the Gospel as given in the word of God, and centered in the person of Messiah, yields a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith (v. 5). The false teachers, however, had strayed away from these, and engaged in “fruitless discussion” (v. 6), desiring to be seen as worthy Torah teachers. Paul’s assessment, however, was that they neither understood the Torah nor its proper application to those they were teaching, even though they apparently taught their doctrines with confidence (v. 7).

Paul then affirms the value of the Torah: “We know that the Torah is good, if one uses it lawfully.” The problem was not with the Torah, but the manner in which the false teachers were twisting its message. In other words, they were applying the Torah in an “unlawful” manner. In explaining how they were doing this, Paul emphasizes the proper (lawful) use of the Torah: “realizing the fact (literally, “knowing this”) that Torah (*nomos*) is not made for a righteous person, but for those who are lawless and rebellious...” (v. 9). Here is the pivotal sentence, and it will be important for us to look more closely at it.

First, Paul begins with the words “knowing this,” a phrase he often uses to introduce a basic truth with which all agree.¹³ That which all acknowledge as true is that the “Torah is not made for a righteous person.” But this translation does not accurately convey the Greek text. When we read the English word “made,” we think of the original giving of the Torah at Sinai, as though Paul meant “the Torah was not given to righteous people,” or “God never intended the Torah to be used by righteous people.” But the word “made” in our English translation is actually the Greek verb *keimai* which does not mean “to make” but “to lay down,” much like our English phrase “to lay down the law.” This, in fact, is how the *English Standard Version* translates our verse: “understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient.” When we realize what Paul actually wrote, a new understanding emerges. When we speak of a law being “laid down,” we mean that it is applied by some guardian of the law upon someone else who has transgressed the law. Perhaps an illustration will help explain my point. Consider the speed limit as an example of the law. As long as a person applies the law to himself, and remains within the speed limit, there is no need for someone else (such as a police officer) to “lay down the law.” It is only when a person fails to make a proper application of the law to himself that someone else must “lay down the law” in regard to his deeds. From Paul’s perspective, the false teachers had failed to properly apply the Torah to themselves and were therefore in a position for the Torah to be laid down against them. Yet in spite of this, they were attempting to enact the Torah against others.

In the list of sins that follows (vv. 9–10), Paul shows that he has the second half of the Ten Words in mind. The opening three pairs of terms (lawless/rebellious; ungodly/sinners; unholy/profane) set the general tenor of Paul’s list of vices, and roughly correspond to the first half of the Ten Words (which speaks of sins against God). Then he concludes his list with parallels to the second half of the Ten Words (which speaks of sins against one’s fellowman):

1 Timothy 1:9–10	Ten Words
those who kill father and mother	honor your father and mother
murderers	you shall not murder
immoral people and homosexuals	you shall not commit adultery

kidnappers	you shall not steal
liars and perjurers	you shall not bear false witness
whatever is contrary to sound teaching	you shall not covet

It is clear that Paul is following the general outline of the Ten Words, for “murderers” would surely include those who kill father and mother, yet he lists these separately in order to emphasize the parallel. Likewise, the rabbinic interpretation of “you shall not steal” was that this referred to kidnapping.¹⁴ Since the surrounding laws were capital offenses, the Sages taught that “you shall not steal” was also a capital offense, and only kidnapping would be a theft of that kind. Finally, the prohibition of coveting is an inclusive commandment, for coveting a neighbor’s house or possessions could lead to murder, theft, or bearing false witness. And coveting a neighbor’s wife leads to adultery. Paul likewise gives an all encompassing phrase to end his list: “whatever is contrary to sound teaching.” Thus, in making this list, Paul points out clear examples of those who fail to apply the Torah to themselves and as a result stand guilty before the judge who will lay down the law against them.

But surely Paul is not implying that the false teachers were murderers or guilty of kidnapping or adultery! No, he simply is demonstrating how the Torah is “laid down” against those who fail to properly apply it to their own lives. And this is his point: the false teachers had also failed to make a proper application of the Torah to their lives, because in all of their study, they had failed to see that Messiah Yeshua is the goal of the Torah. For Paul, the Torah is properly understood and applied only when it results in seeing and accepting Yeshua as God’s Messiah, which in turn results in righteous living. This is why he concludes the paragraph with the phrase “according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted.”¹⁵

Ultimately, then, the “lawful” or proper use of the Torah, which Paul labels as “good,” is the self-application of its precepts through the agency of the Spirit. Or to put it another way, the Torah is properly applied when it is written on the heart. And when such is the case, the Torah does not need to be “laid down” or administered by someone else, for obedience to its precepts has become the very desire of the heart. What is more, such heartfelt obedience to the Torah continues to lead one to the Messiah, the very goal of the Torah.

We see, then, that in our text Paul reiterates the same theme he has taught elsewhere regarding the Torah and its personal application.¹⁶ Apart from the work of the Spirit by which the Torah is written upon the heart, it does not fulfill its divine purpose of setting apart God’s people unto Himself. When, however, the Spirit lifts the veil and reveals the eternal truths of the Torah, the redeemed soul is given true freedom, that is, freedom to obey God’s commandments. Apart from the work of the Spirit in bringing the soul to life, the sinner is a slave to sin (Romans 6:17), and the Torah is properly “laid down” against such sinners. But when the Torah is written upon the hearts of those who have been redeemed, they are freed from the enslavement of sin, and enabled to become the servants of righteousness (Romans 6:18). By the work of the Spirit, they live in accordance with the Torah (Romans 8:4) “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (2Corinthians 3:17).

Summary

The words of Paul in 1 Timothy 1:8-9 appear to teach that God never intended the Torah to be applicable to righteous people, but that He gave it solely to condemn the unrighteous. But such an interpretation cannot be sustained, either by comparing Paul’s teaching elsewhere, nor from a closer reading of the passage itself. The pivotal phrase in this text is “that Torah (*nomos*) is not made for a righteous person, but for those who are lawless and rebellious” (v. 9). The proper interpretation rests on

the meaning of the Greek word that has been translated “made” by most of the English translations. The Greek word *keimai* does not mean “made” but rather “laid down,” so the phrase should read “the Torah is not laid down for a righteous person, but for those who are lawless and rebellious.” The idea of “laying down the law” is not that of self application of the Torah, but occurs when someone has transgressed the law. Paul’s point is that when an individual fails to personally apply the Torah to his or her life (something that can only be done by a person upon whose heart the Torah has been written by the Spirit), the Torah will be “laid down” against that person. In short, the Torah is only “laid down” against those who have disobeyed it, that is, against the unrighteous.

In the larger context of 1 Timothy, Paul’s purpose for making this point is that there were false teachers at Ephesus who had put themselves forward as teachers of the Torah, but in reality, who had failed to make a proper application of the Torah to their own lives. As such, the Torah is rightly “laid down” against such unrighteous ones. Paul’s proof that they had not properly applied the Torah to their own lives was that in their use of the Torah, they had failed to see Messiah as the Torah’s goal. Rather than being good teachers of the Torah, they actually stand condemned by the Torah, for apart from faith in Messiah Yeshua, they bear their own sin.

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- [1] Irenaeus, *The Sole Government of God*, Book IV, chs. 14–15.
 - [2] As is typical of some of the early Church Fathers, Ezekiel 20:25 (“I also gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live”) is brought forward to show that the giving of the Torah beyond the Ten Words was done in order to condemn Israel in her sinfulness. But this word of Ezekiel is not referring to the statutes and ordinances of the Torah, but of the statutes and ordinances of the idolatrous worship into which Israel fell. That Ezekiel considers that God “gave” them to Israel (*natan*) is analogous to what Paul states in Romans 1:24 that “God gave them over to in the lusts of the hearts to impurity.” See the comments of Keil and Delitzsch on Ezekiel 20:24–25.
 - [3] Irenaeus, *Ibid.*, Book IV, ch. 16, §3.
 - [4] Clement of Alexandria, *Stomata*, Book IV, ch. 3; also cf. Book I, ch. 27.
 - [5] *Ibid.*, Book VII, ch. 2.
 - [6] Archelaus, *The Acts of the Disputation*, §31.
 - [7] Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Timothy* (vol. xxi in the reprint by Baker Book House, 1984), p. 26.
 - [8] *Ibid.*, p. 30.
 - [9] David Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992), p. 635.
 - [10] Homer Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Moody Press, 1958), p. 87.
 - [11] Ralph Earle, “1 Timothy” in Gaebelien & Douglas, eds. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols. (Zondervan, 1978), 11.352.
 - [12] See Kurt Rudolph, “Gnosticism” in *The Anchor Bible*, 6 vols. (Doubleday, 1999), 2.1133-40.
 - [13] Cf. Romans 5:3; 6:9; 1 Corinthians 15:58; 2 Corinthians 1:7; 4:14; 5:6, 11; Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 6:8, 9; Philippians 1:16; Colossians 3:24; 1 Thessalonians 1:4.
 - [14] cf. *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, Bachodesh vii (Lauterbach edition, 2.261–62); b.*Sanhedrin* 86a.
 - [15] Note that vv. 12–17 continue the theme of Messiah Yeshua as the goal to which the “lawful” use of the Torah proceeds. Paul demonstrates this through an autobiographical description. Before coming to faith, Paul (like the false teachers) misapplied the Torah (though he did it out of ignorance). Yet in God’s grace, Paul was granted the ability to see the revelation of Yeshua in the Torah and faith to believe in Him. As a result, he was able to use the Torah as it was intended to be used (“lawfully”), i.e., as a revelation of God’s will in the walk of faith.
 - [16] Note particularly Romans 8:1–8; 2 Corinthians 3.