

Lesson 44 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 4:15

Romans 4:15 — For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

“For the law brings wrath.” That sounds bad, but what does it mean? What law is Paul referring to here in verse 15? And how does that law bring wrath?

Before we look at those questions, we need to first look at the Greek text. Usually, we don’t need to do that, and we can instead just look at the English translation — but that is not the case here. Romans 4:13-16 is one of those rare passages in the Bible where the common English translations do not completely match the underlying Greek text.

If we look at the right side of the Handout for Lesson 44, we can see the text of those four verses (including our current verse 15) from four English translations: the English Standard Version, the King James Version, the American Standard Version, and a fourth translation that we will consider in just a moment.

If we look at the left side of the Handout for Lesson 44, we can see the Greek text of those four verses, along with the ESV translation and the Strong’s numbers beneath the Greek words. This combination of the Greek text aligned with the English translation (usually in the order of the Greek text rather than the English text) is called an Interlinear Bible — and it is extremely helpful.

For example, look at the first highlight on the left side of the page — it shows the Greek word for “law” (Strong’s #3551). But you will notice that the ESV translation beneath that *one* Greek word shows *two* English words — “the law.” Where is that word “the” in the Greek text? It’s not there. And the fact that one Greek word has been turned into two English words is a clue that something might not be quite right in that translation.

And what we see with ESV on the left side is, of course, also what we see with the ESV on the right side. In place of “law” in the Greek, we see “the law” in the English.

If we look at the next two English translations on the right — the KJV and the ASV — we see the same thing. Like the ESV, they each translate the one Greek word “law” with two English words, “the law.” And, sadly, as we can see, that is even the case with the translation that I turn to first when I need a particularly accurate translation — the American Standard Version. The ASV, like the ESV and like the KJV, inserts the definite article “the” in front of “law” even though that definite article is absent in the Greek text.

But, as accurate as it is, the ASV is not the most accurate translation of the Greek text. I think a more accurate translation of the Greek text is the Young’s Literal Translation, which is the translation shown at the bottom of the right side of the Handout. Whether Young’s is the most accurate translation of all is a matter of debate, but it is certainly the most accurate when it comes to these verses. As we can see, it translates the Greek word for “law” as “law” — not “the law.”

That is for verse 13, but, as we can see, the same thing happens in verse 14. The Greek text has one word, the ESV, KJV, and ASV all trans-

late that one word as two words, and the Young's Literal Translation translates it as one word.

Earlier we looked at what Paul meant when he talked about "law" rather than "the law" in verses 13 and 14. As we said, I think Paul was talking about any system of justification that requires flawless conduct.

But now we have reached verse 15, and soon we will also reach verse 16. And if we look at the Greek text on the left side of the Handout, we can see that everything changes in these two verses when it comes to the Greek word translated "law." Instead of just the one Greek word for "law" as we saw in verses 13-14, we now see the definite article in verses 15-16 — we see "the law." This difference between verses 13-14 and verses 15-16 is clear in the Greek text and clear in the Young's Literal Translation, but that fact is completely obscured in the ESV, KJV, and ASV.

And what can we say about that difference? Has Paul narrowed his focus in verses 15-16? Has Paul gone from talking about "law" in general to instead talking about a specific law? And, if so, what is that specific law? Is it the law of Moses?

Some argue that Paul has not narrowed his focus. They say that when Paul says "the law" in verse 15, he is just referring back to the same general system of law that he was talking about in verses 13-14.

Is that correct? If all we had was verse 15, then I would say that view might be correct. But we also have verse 16, where Paul again refers to "the law." And in verse 16, as we will see, Paul is almost certainly using "the law" to refer to the law of Moses.

Given that, I think the better view is that verse 15 is also referring to the law of Moses. And so, yes, I think Paul has narrowed his focus in verse 15 from a general system of law to a specific system of law — the law of Moses.

Why would Paul do that? I think the context of Romans 4 answers that question. Why do we have Romans 4?

We looked at that question when we started this chapter, and what we said is that Paul is using the example of Abraham in Romans 4 to advance his primary thesis — that it is the gospel of Christ, rather than works of the law, that is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Paul has already done the first part of that — he has shown through the example of Abraham that it is the gospel of Christ, rather than works of the law, that is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

I think here in verse 15, Paul has turned to the second part of that thesis — that it is to the Jew first and also to the Greek. To do that, Paul needs to talk about the Jews and the Gentiles — and I think that is what Paul is doing here in verses 15-16.

“For the law brings wrath.” What does that mean? The word “for” tells us that this phrase is explaining the previous verse — and, in particular, I think verse 15 starts with an example of the previous verse.

Verse 14 told us that, if we are under a system that is based on performance and flawless conduct, then faith is null and the promise is void. Why is faith null? Because the system is based on performance

rather than faith. And why is the promise void? Because no one can fulfill the condition required to receive the promise.

Can we think of a specific example of that? We certainly can — the law of Moses. The only person who was ever able to perfectly keep the law of Moses was Jesus. No one else could ever do that. And so, if you are basing your justification on keeping the law of Moses, as was true of most of the Jews, then your faith is null and the promise is void.

And what we do have in place of that faith and those promises if we seek justification by flawless conduct? We have only wrath. That is all that remains for a lawbreaker who seeks to be justified by keeping the law.

And, again, I think we see Paul the logician here. If no one can keep the law perfectly, and if those who break the law will experience the wrath of God, then the law brings wrath. Logically, the law leads to wrath — not because of a failure of the law, but because of a failure of man to keep the law. That is what we see at the beginning of verse 15.

“But.” There is that beautiful word again! “But!” Every time we reach some terrible dead-end in this letter where everything looks hopeless, we find that little word “but.”

Under the law of Moses or, in fact, under any system that demands flawless conduct, our faith will be null, the promises will be void, and the only thing we will find is wrath. **But!** Aren't we thankful for that word?

“But where there is no law there is no transgression.” I know we were all looking forward to that statement, but what does it mean?

Maybe it just means that if you are not under a law, then you can't be guilty of transgressing that law. And so, if you were not under any law at all ("where there is no law"), then you could never be guilty of any transgression ("there is no transgression.")

Is that what Paul is saying here? Maybe, but I don't think so. Why not? Well, for starters, I don't see how that statement fits in with Paul's argument here. Also, I don't see how that statement, while true in theory, would ever apply to anyone. Perhaps we could say that it applies to children who don't yet know good from evil, but again I don't see how that observation fits in with Paul's argument here.

Yes, if there was some accountable human being somewhere not under a law from God, then that person could not transgress a law from God. But who in the history of the world has not been under a law from God?

Adam and Eve were under a law from God. Noah and all who came after him are under a law from God. Gentiles prior to the cross were under a law from God. The Jews prior to the cross were under the law of Moses. Everyone after the cross is under the law of Christ.

I just don't think Paul is telling us here about some non-existent person who is not under any law from God. But what then is Paul telling us here?

Let's start by asking ourselves what we would expect Paul to tell us here. He just told us about what we will find at the end of a system based on flawless conduct, and then he used the law of Moses as an example of such a law. Do we think that perhaps Paul would now tell us about what we will find at the end of a system based on faith? I

think the answer is yes, and I think that is exactly what the second half of verse 15 is doing.

And that view makes perfect sense with that word “but.” The first half of verse 15 is bad news. Don’t we think we will see some good news after the word “but”? I think so, and I think that the good news we are about to see is THE good news! I think Paul is contrasting justification through flawless conduct with justification through the gospel.

I think that when Paul says “but where there is no law,” he is saying “but where there is no system based on flawless conduct but there is instead a system based on faith.” That is the same contrast Paul has been making throughout this chapter, and I think he is still making it here. This system of “no law” in verse 15 is the system of faith.

That, of course, does not mean that we are no longer under any law. We know that we are under a law even with the system of faith. Paul explains that fact in 1 Corinthians 9:21 when he describes himself as “not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ.”

But justification under the law of Christ does not demand flawless conduct — and that fact is the good news! That fact about the law of Christ is the gospel of Christ! That fact explains why we see the word “but” in verse 15.

If I am seeking a reward under a system that demands flawless conduct, then a single flaw is all it takes for me to lose that reward. A single transgression will cause me to be unjustified. And all have sinned! Paul has already proved that.

But what about a system based on faith? What about a system under which my justification is freely given by God? Under that system,

there is no transgression. Under that system, my flaws do not automatically cause me to lose my reward. Under that system, my sins do not automatically prevent my justification.

Perhaps this is the best way to think about it: My flawed conduct is not a transgression of a system that does not demand flawless conduct.

And, again, that is nothing but a restatement of the gospel. Our sins can be forgiven, and we can be justified by faith apart from flawless conduct. As Paul will tell us later, we “are not under law but under grace” (Romans 6:14).

We don’t need to be perfect to be justified by faith. Why not? Because Jesus is perfect. But saying that faithfulness does not require perfect obedience does not mean that we can approach the gospel of Christ like we are in a cafeteria line, picking what we want and leaving what we don’t want. That is not faithfulness under any definition of the word. That is disobedience. And we are not saved by the gospel of Christ until we have obeyed the gospel of Christ. And Paul is not saying anything different here.

And we should note what else Paul is **not** saying here. Paul is not saying there is no *sin*. Instead, Paul is saying there is no *transgression*.

Yes, I commit sin, but my sin is not a transgression of a system that does not demand flawless conduct. Yes, I sin, but that sin does not automatically disqualify me from being justified by that system of faith. Paul will say this again later in this same letter.

Romans 5:13 — For sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law.

I think that verse in Romans 5 is considering the same “no law” system that verse 15 is considering here. Romans 5 tells us that “sin is not counted where there is no law.” Romans 4 tells us that “where there is no law there is no transgression.” I think those two statements are saying the same thing. Why is there no transgression of the system of faith? Because sin is not counted.

And once again, by calling it a “no law” system, Paul is not saying that we are not under a law. We know we are under the law of Christ. Instead, what Paul means by “no law” is that there is no requirement of flawless conduct. We can sin under the system of faith and still be justified. That is how Paul can refer to the system of faith as a “no law” system.

And Romans is not the only place where Paul makes this same distinction.

Galatians 3:12 — But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.”

The law is not of faith. That is what we see here in Romans 4 when Paul talks about “no law.” In Galatians, Paul refers to law as “not faith,” and here I think Paul is referring to faith as “not law.” The system of faith and the system of law are directly opposed to each other — one demands flawless conduct, while the other does not.

But here we need to be careful. Yes, we live under a law today — a law from God that is called the law of Christ (1 Corinthians 9:21) or the

law of faith (Romans 3:27) or the law of liberty (James 1:25). But saying that we live under a law from God today is not the same as saying that we live under a system that demands perfect obedience to that law. If that were the case, then we would be in the same condition under the law of Christ as the Jews were under the law of Moses. If that were the case, the good news would instead be just more bad news.

Yes, we live under the law of Christ, and yes, the faithful followers of Christ strive each day to be obedient to the law of Christ, but no, our failure to live in perfect obedience to the law of Christ will not disqualify us from being justified by God.

Why not? Because we live under a system of faith, not a system of law. We live under a system that demands faithfulness, not a system that demands flawless conduct. And again, that is nothing more than a restatement of the gospel of Christ, which “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (1:16).

Some of the Jews treated the law of Moses like a checklist. And when they had checked off all the boxes, they figured that God would owe them their salvation. If we do that same thing under the law of Christ, then we are no different from those who did that under the law of Moses. That view of the law — whether it be the law of Moses or the law of Christ — is called legalism.

Paul will consider that false extreme of legalism in this letter, but Paul will also consider the opposite false extreme. And what is the opposite false extreme to legalism? It is **antinomianism**.

And what is antinomianism? The word means “against law,” and it is the false view that grace is a license to sin. It is the view that, if God’s grace covers our sins, then let’s just sin more and more so that grace may abound! After all, if the system of faith does not demand flawless conduct, then how can I ever be faulted for my flawed conduct? And if one flaw does not disqualify me from justification by faith, then wouldn’t the same be true for a million flaws? We can be certain that Paul heard that argument from the Jews he taught in the synagogues, and we know that Paul himself was accused of teaching such things. We have already seen that.

Romans 3:8 — And why not do evil that good may come? — as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.

And Paul will circle back a third time to again discuss that false view of God’s grace.

Romans 6:1-2 — What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?

For now, all we need to notice is that there are two false extremes to what Paul is teaching us here about faith and law. One of those false extremes is legalism, and the other false extreme is antinomianism.

With legalism, we turn the gospel of Christ into just another version of the law of Moses. With antinomianism, we turn the gospel of Christ into a license to sin.

The only difference between them is which ditch we fall into if we follow one of them — the ditch on the left or the ditch on the right. Let’s stay out of the ditch!

Romans 4:16

Romans 4:16 — That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring — not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,

Let's start verse 16 with a quotation by brother K.C. Moser, who wrote a very well-known commentary on Romans entitled *The Gist of Romans*. Here is what he said about these upcoming verses:

K. C. Moser — “No better description of faith has ever been given than that found in Romans 4:16-21.”

And, as we will see, these verses are certainly a beautiful description of faith.

We have often stressed the fact that a living faith is always a doing faith. And we have noted that, despite what some commentators say, Paul is not contrasting doing with thinking. Instead, Paul is contrasting earning with receiving. Our salvation is not earned; our salvation is a free gift from God. But we must do something to receive that free gift — not to earn it, but to receive it. We see that fact, for example, in Acts 2:37-38. They asked what they must do to be saved, and Peter told them what they must do to be saved.

But with all of that said, we need to make sure that we don't swing to the other extreme and focus only on doing in place of thinking. That view is just as wrong as those who focus only on thinking in place of doing. We need both doing and thinking.

Abraham's faith was certainly a doing faith. God said go, and Abraham went. Had Abraham stayed home, I don't think the great statement in Genesis 15:6 about faith being counted as righteousness would ever have been said about him.

Abraham's faith was a doing faith. But Abraham's faith was also a thinking faith. Abraham heard the promises of God, and Abraham believed the promises of God.

And often Abraham believed God, not because of what he saw, but despite what he saw. Abraham looked at himself and the person he saw was old and childless (Genesis 15:2). Abraham looked at his wife, and the person he saw was old and barren (Genesis 11:30). That is what Abraham saw. And yet, despite what he saw, Abraham believed God's promise that he would be the father of many nations (Genesis 15:5-6).

Faith involves both doing and thinking. When James tells us about a saving faith, he focuses on the doing part. Here I think we will see Paul focusing on the thinking part. But neither James nor Paul is saying that faith is only thinking or only doing. Faith is both. A living, saving faith is always a thinking and a doing faith.

Let's start with the first half of verse 16: "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring."

"That is why it depends on faith." What is it? I think the "it" in this verse is pointing us back to the promise of great blessings to Abraham and his offspring that we saw in verse 13 and that we see again in this verse.

Verse 13 told us that those promised blessings did not come through law but through faith. Verses 14-15 explained why they did not come through law. I think verse 16 is now explaining why they did come through faith.

And those two explanations are connected. We see that in verse 16 with the opening phrase: “that is why.”

Why did the blessings come through faith? Paul’s answer to that question depends on why those blessings did not come through law — they couldn’t! Those blessings could not come through law — Paul just explained that.

And so, if those blessings could not come through law, and if those blessings were promised by God, then what is left? How else can we receive those blessings? Flawless conduct is not a path we can take; what path is left? Faith. The path of faith is left. And why did God give us that path? Because the other path of flawless conduct was blocked. We could not reach God by that path, and so God gave us another path. That is John 3:16!