

Q. Can anyone keep the law of God perfectly?

A. Since the fall, no mere human has been able to keep the law of God perfectly, but consistently breaks it in thought, word, and deed.

Text: Romans 3:10-12 (LSB)

10 As it is written,

“THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;

11 THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS,

THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD;

12 ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME WORTHLESS;

THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD,

THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE.”

1. What is “the Fall”?

See **Romans 5:12**; cf. **Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-19**

- Literal – “Because of this, just as through one man the sin into the world entered – and through the sin the death – so also into all men the death spread, upon which all sinned.”¹
- NLT – “When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned.”²

2. Why is perfect obedience necessary?

A. God’s ineffable and immutable holiness demands it.

¹ This is my own extremely wooden translation of the Greek text (Διὰ τοῦτο ὡσπερ δι’ ἑνὸς ἀνθρώπου ἡ ἁμαρτία εἰς τὸν κόσμον εἰσῆλθεν καὶ διὰ τῆς ἁμαρτίας ὁ θάνατος, καὶ οὕτως εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους ὁ θάνατος διῆλθεν, ἐφ’ ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον·).

² Cf. Augustine’s understanding of the four-fold nature of man: able to sin (*posse peccare*), not able not to sin (*non posse non peccare*), able not to sin (*posse non peccare*), unable to sin (*non posse peccare*).

- **Psalm 15:1-2a³** (LSB) – “O Yahweh, who may sojourn in Your tent? Who may dwell on Your holy mountain? He who walks blamelessly...”.
- **Psalm 24:3-4** (LSB) – “Who may ascend into the mountain of Yahweh? And who may rise in His holy place? He who has innocent hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to worthlessness and has not sworn deceitfully.”
- **1 Timothy 6:16** (LSB) – “[God]⁴ alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him *be* honor and eternal might. Amen.”
- **1 John 1:5** (LSB) – “And this is the message we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.”

Therefore, “fellowship” with a perfect God requires perfection.

- **Habakkuk 1:13** (NASB) – “Your eyes are too pure to approve⁵ evil, and you cannot look on wickedness *with favor*.”
- **Psalm 5:4** (LSB) – “For You are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil⁶ does not sojourn with You.”

In fact, so holy and perfect is the Triune God that He would not – could not – accept any sacrifice – whether a priest serving Him⁷ or an offering made to Him⁸ – from His people that had even the slightest blemish or imperfection.

As Bavinck notes, “God, being faithful and true, cannot view as perfect that which is not perfect. As the righteous and holy One, God cannot give up the

³ The rest of the Psalm goes on to list other prerequisites for approaching the holy presence of God. This is why sacrifice was inextricably intertwined with God’s presence via the Temple in the OT.

⁴ The referent of the pronoun is not Christ Jesus (6:14), but God (i.e., the Father, 6:13 [cf. CSB, NLT, NIV]).

⁵ The Hebrew literally reads “to see evil” (cf. LSB). The Hebrew verb (*ra’ah*) is often used this way (i.e., figuratively).

⁶ The Hebrew can be interpreted as “evil” (i.e., an abstract noun [cf. ESV, CSB, KJV] or as a substantival adjective (i.e., “the evil one” or “evil people” [cf. NET, NIV, NLT; NJB = “No sinner can be Your guest”]).

⁷ See, for example, **Leviticus 21**.

⁸ See, for example, **Leviticus 1-5**.

demands of [His] law nor content Himself with a semirighteousness which is basically no righteousness at all.”⁹

B. Our enjoyment of Eternal Life depends on it

The Bible teaches that wages of temporal sin is eternal death¹⁰, and the wages of perfect obedience is eternal life.¹¹

In fact, if we miss this crucial point, the doctrines of the imputation of Christ’s active obedience – and thus the doctrine of justification by faith – is greatly truncated at best or distorted at worst.

- “Active obedience” refers to Jesus’ perfect, positive accomplishment of all that God’s law requires of all humanity as a precondition to the enjoyment of eternal life with Him.
 - Crowe: “Though Jesus came under the Mosaic administration of the law (**Gal. 4:4**), He ultimately had to do all that was required of Adam in the beginning, which was perfect obedience. Put simply, Jesus had to love and obey God fully.”¹²

To help understand the necessity of Christ’s perfect life for our enjoyment of eternal life, it is worth quoting Crowe at length:

It is only with Adam in his sinless, created state that the possibility of eternal life upon the condition of perfect obedience, according to the covenant, is possible. Once sin enters the world, it affects all those born naturally after Adam. Paul’s argument in Romans 5 makes it clear that Adam is a covenant head of humanity. As the first man, and a man with whom God entered into a special relationship, Adam’s sinful actions affect those who come after him (Rom. 5:12). Although the Mosaic Law comes to Israel in the Old Testament, the Mosaic law is

⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*. Ed. by John Bolt, Tr. by John Vriend. 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003-8), 4:209.

¹⁰ Cf. **Romans 6:23a**

¹¹ For a much fuller development of this concept, see G.K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 29-46, as well as Richard C. Barcellos, *Getting the Garden Right* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2017), 53-77.

¹² Brandon Crowe, *Why Did Jesus Live a Perfect Life: The Necessity of Christ’s Obedience for Our Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 21 (emphasis mine).

not given to a sinless people for whom perfect obedience is a possibility. The Israelites were never in a position to gain eternal life, strictly speaking, by their law keeping. God's grace preceded the giving of the Mosaic law; the Mosaic law was never intended as the means to secure eternal life. Only perfect obedience can meet the demands of eternal life; imperfect obedience simply will not suffice.¹³

- **Galatians 3:10-13** (LSB) – “For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse, for it is written, ‘CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO DO THEM.’ Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident, for ‘THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.’ However, the Law is not of faith; rather, ‘**HE WHO DOES THEM SHALL LIVE BY THEM.**’ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us – for it is written, ‘CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE.’” (emphasis mine)
- **Romans 7:10-12, 14** (LSB) – “And this commandment, **which was to lead to life**, was found to lead to death for me. For sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good...For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am fleshly, having been sold into bondage under sin.” (emphasis mine)

Since all who are “in Adam” are unable to earn eternal life by commandment keeping,¹⁴ we must therefore be united – by grace¹⁵ alone through faith alone – to the only One who has perfectly kept God's Law.

3. Was there “law” before Moses?

That is, what did “covenantal obedience” to God look like before Moses?

¹³ *Ibid.*, 26 (emphasis mine).

¹⁴ Cf. **Galatians 3:21-22** (LSB) – “Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed be by law. But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin [cf. Rom. 3:9], so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.”

¹⁵ I am also thinking of “grace” redemptive-historically, as Paul does in **Romans 5:21, 6:14-15**, etc. In Galatians Paul refers to this aeon of grace as “the faith” (tragically, the definite article [“the”] is omitted by most translations) in **Galatians 3:23 [2X], 25, 26**.

- **Romans 5:13-14** (LSB) – “For until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the trespass of Adam, who is a type of Him who as to come.”

Is Paul saying that there was no “law” from the time between Adam and Moses, and therefore God did not sin impute sin to anyone?

Haldane’s words prove helpful:

[Here] Paul reasons backward from death to sin, and from sin to law. Admitting, in the last clause of the verse, that sin could not be imputed without law, he proves that sin was in the world by the undeniable fact that there was death; and if this proves that there was sin, then it inevitably follows that there must have been a law.¹⁶

This accords with Paul’s earlier teaching that there was indeed a binding and universal law written on the heart of all humanity by God Himself.

- **Romans 2:12a, 13-15** (LSB) – “For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law...For *it is* not the hearers of the Law *who* are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. For when Gentiles who do not have the Law naturally do the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they demonstrate the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.” (Emphasis mine)

This concept of God’s requirement of perfect obedience as a prerequisite to our justification and enjoyment of eternal life is captured well in the Reformed notion of “**the covenant of works.**”

Since all those “in Adam” are unable to keep this covenant, our only hope of justification before God and enjoyment of eternal life is in “**the covenant of grace,**” wherein God graciously provides justification and eternal life to all

¹⁶ Robert Haldane, *An Exposition of Romans*, 209.

who are “in Christ” by faith in the gospel, and thus have His perfect law-righteousness imputed to them.

- **Romans 8:1-4** (LSB) – “Therefore there is now **no condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus. For **the law** of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from **the law of sin and death**. For what **the Law** could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God *did*: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and *as an offering* for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that **the righteous requirement of the Law** might be fulfilled in us,¹⁷ who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”
- **Galatians 3:6, 8** (LSB) – “Just as Abraham BELIEVED GOD AND IT WAS COUNTED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS...And the Scripture foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, proclaimed the gospel beforehand to Abraham, *saying*, “ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU.” (emphasis mine)
- **Romans 1:17** – “For a/the¹⁸ righteousness of God in [the gospel] is being revealed beginning and ending in faith,¹⁹ just as it has been written, ‘The righteous by faith will live.’”

Conclusion

Since no one is able to keep God’s law perfectly, and since God requires the perfect keeping of His law, we see just how glorious the gospel is: not only did

¹⁷ Brian Rosner, in his excellent book *Paul and the Law: Keeping the Commandment of God* (NSBT) argues that Paul’s statement here refers to the objective sense of through our justification “in Christ.” That is, because Christ perfectly “fulfilled the requirement of the Law,” all those who have this righteousness imputed to them are regarded by God as the same. See also, for e.g. Guy Prentiss Waters, “Romans” in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 188-89. Thomas Schreiner, in both his commentary on Romans and other books, sees this [objectively] to be so, but also believes that there is a subjective element at work as well – namely, that we are also, by the indwelling Spirit, now able to actually obey – from the [new] heart – God’s law in practice.

¹⁸ This is my own translation of the Greek. There is no article, which is why the NIV translates it, “For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last...”.

¹⁹ Literally, “from faith unto/for faith” (cf. ESV). I am following Doug Moo’s exegetical reasons for using the NIV’s translation of the Greek, which picks up the redemptive-historical implications of Paul’s overall argument in the letter, namely that God’s people under the old covenant were made right with God by faith, just as God’s people are made right with Him by faith in the new covenant.

Christ have to die for our sin/law-breaking;²⁰ but also had to live a perfect life *in* obedience to God's law for our justification and enjoyment of eternal life with God. The glory of the gospel is that this accessed only through union "in Him," which is by faith alone, and thus to the glory of God alone!!

²⁰ **1 John 3:4b** (LSB) – "Everyone who does sin also does lawlessness; sin is lawlessness." (emphasis mine)