

## V. Religious Presumption

October 27/28/29, 2015

Romans 2:17-29

**Aim:** To put aside any thoughts that having the benefits of the covenant can excuse us from breaking the law of God and thus avoiding His judgment and wrath.

In this section, Paul resumes the diatribe style of 2:1-5, using direct address and a series of rhetorical questions in his polemic. The person he addresses, though easily enough recognized from what Paul has said in 2:1-16, is now for the first time explicitly identified as a Jew. A sharpening of the attack is thereby indicated. Paul's main point in 2:1-16 is that, because Jews will be assessed by God in the judgment on the same basis as Gentiles (works, doing 'the law'), they cannot assume, any more than Gentiles, that they will escape God's wrath (2:4). Paul is, however, well aware that his argument ignores a crucial matter: the Jews' claim to possess a status by virtue of the covenant that puts them in a position entirely different from that of the Gentiles. In vv. 17-29, Paul takes up this matter.

Without dismissing the Jews' claims entirely (3:1-2), Paul insists that their privileges do not exempt them from God's judgment. In two paragraphs with roughly parallel arguments (vv. 17-24, 25-29), Paul takes up those two things that, more than any others, pointed to the Jews' special status: the law and circumcision. In both paragraphs, without dismissing them as worthless, Paul argues that neither knowledge of the law nor physical circumcision has value unless the law is obeyed. Again, it is what is actually *done* that is critical in determining every person's destiny – for the Jew as well as for the Gentile (2:12).

Paul's point in this section is not to demonstrate that Jews commit sins (no Jew would deny that) but that these sins, despite possession of the law and circumcision, make Jews just as liable to God's judgment as Gentiles. In arguing in this manner, Paul is implicitly contesting the traditional Jewish understanding of the covenant. Whereas Jews tended to rely on their election and works of the law, Paul insists that it is faith – only and always – that is the basis for a righteous standing with God. Therefore, the 'signs' of election – the law and circumcision – are of no value without this faith.

Having shown how both the moral Jew and the moral Gentile alike will be brought before God's great tribunal in the end times and have no basis for any sense of well-being and security (2:1-16), Paul now focuses exclusively on the Jews, the covenant people of God. Before he explains the way of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, he shatters the idea of false spiritual security that most Jews had in their heritage (2:17a), in their knowledge (vv. 17b-24), and in their ceremony (vv. 25-29).

Romans 2:17-29 is the antidote to self-deception, where Paul warns religious people like us to guard ourselves from the dangers of a false religious confidence.

### A. Law (Romans 2:17-24)

Some people build up a false sense of spiritual security by trying to convince themselves they are basically good and that a just God could not condemn good people to hell. They believe that their good works and intentions outweigh their bad ones and that, in the balance, they are pleasing and acceptable to God. Others believe that God is too loving to send anyone to hell and will ultimately save even the most wicked of sinners. Still others insist that there is no God and

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that the idea of a final divine judgment is therefore ludicrous. These beliefs are so common that those who put their security in them can find reassurance in the large numbers of other people doing the same. They even design religions to affirm these views.

Having now identified the ‘man’ as a Jew, the apostle removes any hope that the children of Abraham will receive special favors before God’s seat of judgment; each person regardless of race will be evaluated according to his works (vv. 6-11).

### 1. Relying on the Law (2:17-20)

Paul here claims for the Jew nothing more than what the Jews of his days were claiming for themselves; every item on the list in vv. 17-20 is paralleled in Jewish literature of the time.

The first principle danger of self-deception is in thinking we are okay because we possess the truth. Such overconfidence was, of course, the great danger for the religious-minded Jew of Bible times. Every Jew realized that in respect to the truth he was privileged far above the rest of the people on the earth.

Paul recites key elements of Jewishness that, as he knew well, distinguished members of his race from others. These he had repeatedly heard from Jews as he sought to teach them the gospel of Christ. There is no trace of sarcasm in these words. Historically speaking, this is a splendid account of what it meant to be a Jew at that time. The Law was, indeed, their ‘resting place’ and they did ‘boast’ of their knowledge of the one true God and of His ‘will’ in the face of the gods of Greece and Rome. Furthermore, Jews saw themselves as having a mission to the Gentiles, that is, to welcome the Gentile search after God into the portals of the synagogue to heard His sacred Law (cp. Is. 49:6). Many thousands of Gentiles became God-fearers, attending the synagogues and submitting to instruction by their rabbis.

#### a) Six Blessings (2:17-18)

In this one sentence the apostle notes that their sense of privilege had six aspects. These six things in vv. 17-18 were wonderful privileges. But as wonderful as they were, they had a deluding effect on the Jews. When they compared their enlightenment with the abysmal theological ignorance of the Gentiles they looked very good. Of course they were acceptable to God! We today recognize their spiritual blindness. But the blade cuts both ways, does it not? The sword that pierces the heart of the religious Jew also pierces ours. It is easy to imagine we are okay because we know so much more about the average person on the street, especially in this day of Biblical illiteracy.

What do the Jews have? They have the Bible (cp. 3:1-2). The main advantage the Jews had over all other people was that they had the Bible. They knew God’s will (2:18). They were resting in it (2:17). There was a serious problem, however. Having this special blessing had made them proud. And that’s exactly where so many people are today. Look at all the cathedrals in Europe. People hear the cathedral bells. Isn’t that enough? They have their children baptized, christened, and confirmed. They have church weddings. Isn’t that enough? You find the same mentality in America.

#### (1) Three Privileges (2:17)

<sup>17</sup>*But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God...*

At last Paul directly addresses this ‘man’ as a Jew.

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The three privileges in this verse are listed in ascending order: belong to the chosen people, reliance on the law, and a special relationship with God. Each is presented from the standpoint of the Jew.

### (a) *Jew*

First, *they were called Jews*, which means ‘praise to Jehovah.’ So proud were they of this name that many of the Jews living in Gentile cities used it as a surname.

The name ‘Jew,’ which originally referred to a person from the region occupied by the descendants of Judah, was applied to Israelite people generally after the Exile. By Paul’s day, ‘Jew’ had become a common designation of anyone who belonged to the people of Israel. To be named a Jew, then, refers to the religious status shared by anyone who belonged to the covenant people.

The chosen people of God took great pride in the name ‘Jew.’ In centuries past they had been referred to as Hebrews, so called because of the language they spoke. They also had long been called Israelites. But by the time of Christ, the most common name they had was that of ‘Jew.’ The term was derived from *Judah*, the name of one of the twelve tribes as well as the name of the southern kingdom after the division following Solomon’s death. But during and after the Babylonian captivity, it had come to refer to the whole race that descended from Abraham through Isaac.

The name represented both their racial and religious heritage, and in their own minds it denoted their distinctiveness from all other peoples of the world. Despite the bondage and oppression they had suffered at the hands of Gentiles for hundreds of years, and were presently still suffering, they wore the name ‘Jew’ as a badge of great honor and pride. The name marked them off as the unique and specially favored people of God. The root meaning of *Judah*, and therefore of ‘Jew,’ is ‘praised,’ and the Jews of Paul’s day considered that to be a well-deserved title and description of themselves.

Jews had long since lost sight of the purpose of their unique divine calling. Instead of viewing divine truths and blessings as a trust from a gracious and forgiving God, they viewed them as their right by merit. They believed they were specially blessed, not because God’s grace but because of their own goodness. They felt superior and proud. Boasting in their heritage as God’s chosen people caused many of them to think they could sin with impunity. As the heirs of God’s promise to Abraham, they believed they were automatically protected from judgment.

In a similar way, countless people since the time of Christ have considered themselves safe from God’s judgment simply because they have been born into a Christian family or have been baptized or belong to a church or have made a profession of faith. Some people consider themselves Christians virtually by default, because of the country of their birth. Such ideas about covenant transference of salvation and about the spiritual efficacy of baptism are merely extensions of the kind of thinking that caused the common Jewish belief in New Testament times that a person was saved simply by being a circumcised descendant of Abraham through the line of Isaac.

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### (b) *Law*

Second, they relied upon *the possession of the Law* (the Torah) as giving them a unique standing before God. The thought here is not that they saw their special status coming from living by the Torah, but simply from possessing it.

The Jews had the law of God, which was the glory of Israel. No other nation on the planet had such a clear manifestation of the law of God.

Paul phrases the second privilege enjoyed by the Jews in such a way as to suggest the root problem he addresses. Possession of the law was certainly a genuine blessing. But the problem came because the Jews ‘rely on the law.’ In Paul’s day, Jews thought their reliance on the law would exempt them from judgment.

Since it was impossible for anyone to keep all of God’s law perfectly, some of the rabbis began teaching that merely *learning* the facts of the Law was sufficient to please God. Weakening the purpose of the law still further, some taught that the mere *possession* of it, in the form of written scrolls, was sufficient. Still others taught that Jews were safe from God’s judgment simply because, as a people, they were the specially chosen *recipients and custodians* of God’s Law.

### (c) *God*

Third, *they bragged regarding God*. Boasting in God can be good if it is for the right reason, but they were boasting because of their being God’s favorites, the true people of God.

The final privilege enumerated in v.17 is that the Jew ‘boasts in God.’ ‘Boasting’ is not in itself wrong, as Jeremiah 9:23-24 (alluded to by Paul in 1 Cor. 1:31 and 2 Cor. 10:17) makes clear. The Jews’ boasting in God’ is not wrong in itself – an instance of human pride and arrogance – but a legitimate pride and joy in the God who had given to Israel so many good things.

When ungodly Jews would ‘boast in God’ it was really a means of boasting in themselves, in the unique privileges and blessings they thought were theirs by right rather than by grace.

### (2) Three Distinguishing Marks (2:18)

...<sup>18</sup> *and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law...*

Paul continues the conditional construction from v. 17, adding two more distinguishing marks of the Jew to his list: the Jew ‘knows His will’ and ‘approves those things that are best.’

#### (a) *Know His Will*

Fourth, *they prided themselves on knowing His revealed will*, derived from the Ten Commandments and other Old Covenant Scriptures.

Self-righteous, presumptuous Jews were satisfied simply to ‘know His will,’ without obeying it. They knew what God required and what He forbade, what He commanded and what He prohibited, what He approved and what He disapproved, what He rewarded and what He punished. But rather than saving them, that knowledge became a judgment against them, because they refused to live by it and refused to accept the remedy for such failure.

#### (b) *Approve What Is Excellent*

Fifth, *they discerned the things that were essential*. That is, they prided themselves on being able to make superior moral judgments. They were far beyond the ignorant Gentiles!

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*Dokimazō* (‘approve’) carried the idea of testing in order to prove the value of something, such as precious metals. In other words, the Jews had the means not only to know what was right and wrong but to discern what was the most important part of God’s law.

### (c) *Instructed from the Law*

Sixth, *they were instructed from the Law*. The Law was a light to their feet.

The final clause of the verse explains why the Jew knows and approves these things: he is ‘instructed by the law.’ The Jews’ knowledge of God’s will and their approval of the things that mattered the most came through their exposure to the instruction of the law in the synagogues and elsewhere.

*Katēcheō* (‘being instructed’) is the term from which *catechism* is derived. It had the general meaning of oral instruction of any sort but was especially associated with teaching by repetition. Both at home and in the synagogues, Jewish boys in particular were systematically and thoroughly ‘instructed out of the Law.’

It is ironic that ancient Jews considered wisdom to consist of acting according to the knowledge one had, whereas the ancient Greeks simply equated wisdom with knowledge. By New Testament times, however, many Jews, especially the religious leaders, had, in practice, accepted the Greek view of wisdom. Whether they did so intentionally or not, the consequence was that they felt content with merely knowing God’s law and had little desire or motivation to obey it. They knew much but obeyed little.

### b) *Four Birthrights (2:19-20)*

In vv. 17-18 Paul has listed five blessings personally enjoyed by the Jews by virtue of their being God’s covenant people. Now, with a change in construction, he enumerates four prerogatives that Jews enjoy in relation to other people because of these blessings: ‘being convinced that you are a guide to the blind, a light for those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, and a teach of the immature.’ It is their uniquely detailed knowledge of God’s will, revealed in the law, that renders Jews responsible to teach others. Paul’s description of this role uses language drawn particularly from Jewish propaganda directed to the Hellenistic world.

The Jews not only felt secure in what they knew but also in what they taught. Considering themselves to be the most religiously wise, they naturally thought themselves to be the most competent teachers of the spiritually unwise, namely the Gentiles, who did not have the benefit of God’s written revelation.

Delusion from privilege can lead to the deadly pride of arrogant presumption. Such pride and presumption can make one insufferable. They fancied themselves guides—lights—correctors—teachers—and so looked down with condescension and scorn on the unwashed. The Gentiles sensed this and resented it. The very privileges that should have produced saints produced arrogant, loveless egotists instead! Again, the sword cuts both ways, because those who hold the truth of the gospel often become this way as well. Proudful presumption upon religious privilege can breed a self-righteous, self-centered, self-deceived stuffed shirt (cp. Luke 18:9-13). Whenever a follower of Christ feels superior, he should beware, for such an attitude is not a sign of God’s grace. Our familiarity with holy things must never give way to spiritual presumption.

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### (1) Their Mission (2:19-20a)

#### (a) *Guide and Light (2:19)*

...<sup>19</sup>*and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness...*

The Jews' sense of mission toward the rest of the world is rooted in the OT. When, therefore, Paul asserts that the Jew was convinced he was a 'guide to the blind' and a 'light for those in darkness,' we think of the duty of God's servant – to some degree at least identified with Israel – to be a 'light to the nations' and 'to open the eyes of the blind' (Is. 42:6-7; cp. 49:6). The Jews, however far short of their responsibility to enlighten the Gentile world they may have fallen, continued to boast in these mandates as a means of highlighting their importance and the value of their law in the eyes of a skeptical and sometimes hostile Gentile world.

Jews in general, and the scribes and Pharisees in particular, considered themselves to be superior mentors of the community in spiritual and moral matters. They saw themselves as religious guides to their unlearned Jewish brethren and especially to the spiritually 'blind' Gentile pagans. But because of their arrogant pride and blatant hypocrisy, Jesus charged them with being 'blind guides' (see Mt. 23:24-28). Far from being qualified to guide others, they were themselves in desperate need of guidance.

Paul notes that most Jews considered themselves to be a 'light to those who are in darkness.' Actually that was precisely the role God had intended for Israel. He had called His people to be a spiritual light to the Gentiles (Is. 42:6; cp. Mt. 5:14-16).

#### (b) *Instructor and Teacher (2:20a)*

...<sup>20</sup>*an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children...*

The self-righteous Jew prided himself as being 'a corrector of the foolish.' Again the primary focus was on the Gentiles, even the wisest of whom most Jews considered to be foolish in the area of religion. The self-righteous Jew also thought of himself as 'a teacher of the immature.' The idea is that of teaching very small children, in this case, children in the Jewish faith. In light of the context, it is likely the term 'immature' here represents Gentile proselytes to Judaism, who needed special instruction.

### (2) Their Knowledge (2:20b)

...*having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—*

Paul highlights the sufficiency of the law by claiming that it contains 'the embodiment of knowledge and truth.' Paul has asserted that all people, especially those without special revelation, have access to 'knowledge' and 'truth' (1:18-19, 25, 28, 32) and are hence 'without excuse' when they turn from it. The Jew has this knowledge and truth embodied in far clearer and more detailed form in the law, a claim he acknowledges, and indeed boasts of. Even more than the Gentile, therefore, the Jewish person is 'without excuse' before God (2:1).

*Morphōsis* ('embodiment') has the basic meaning of an outline or sketch. It therefore seems better to translate the word here as 'semblance' or 'appearance' (cp. 2 Tim. 3:5), because throughout this passage Paul emphasizes the religious superficiality of most of the Jews of his day.

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### 2. Breaking the Law (2:21-24)

#### a) Hypocrisy (2:21-22)

The four sentences in these verses are best taken as rhetorical questions, in keeping with the diatribe style. They expose the Jew who has made the lofty claims of vv. 17-20 as inconsistent and hypocritical, as failing ‘to practice what he preaches.’ All the privileges, distinctions, and gifts that the Jew may claim are meaningless if they are not responded to with a sincere and consistent obedience. And it is just this obedience that is lacking.

#### (1) In Teaching (2:21a)

...<sup>21</sup>*you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself?*

The first charge, that the Jew who teaches others should teach himself, is a heading and is broken down into three specific examples in the questions that follow.

Paul here contends that their understanding and teaching not only fell far short of God’s law but they themselves disobeyed it. Even when they taught the truth, they taught it hypocritically. Like the wicked teachers the psalmist castigated (Ps. 50:16-20), the hypocritical Jew of Paul’s day would often ‘teach another’ person the truths of God’s Word but would fail to teach them to himself. Even less would he obey those truths himself. In theological terms, their preaching reflects orthodoxy (right doctrine), but their living does not reflect orthopraxy (right practice). And because of their greater responsibility, they bring upon themselves greater punishment when they break those laws.

#### (2) In Law-Keeping (2:21b-22)

*While you preach against stealing, do you steal? <sup>22</sup>You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?*

Paul cites three flagrant violations of the law as evidence of the Jew’s failure to ‘teach himself.’ The prohibitions of stealing and adultery, are, of course, included in the Ten Commandments. The third sin is more difficult to identify. Paul’s claim that the Jew ‘detests idols’ is clear enough, and captures an important element of Jewish religion in the first century. Idolatry, in the technical sense, was generally unknown among Jews at this time. Indeed, what Paul accuses the Jews of doing is not specifically worshiping idols, but ‘robbing temples.’ What Paul means by this accusation is not clear.

Paul is accusing the Jews of confusing having the Law with keeping the Law. References to Jews ‘stealing’ and ‘committing adultery’ while teaching the Law of God forbidding such practices need no further explanation. ‘Robbing temples,’ however, is obscure to us and may refer to some notorious events in Paul’s day of which we are unaware.

Paul mentions three areas of their spiritual and moral hypocrisy: stealing, adultery, and sacrilege. Despite the clear pronouncements of the Mosaic law against theft, it was very common in ancient Judaism. The second area of hypocrisy related to sexual sin. As with stealing, the clear implication is that they practiced the very evil they condemned in others.

The third area of hypocrisy related to sacrilege. The root word behind *bdelussō* (‘abhor’) means ‘to stink, to reek.’ During the Greek and Roman occupations after their return from Babylon, Jews developed a strong abhorrence for anything remotely resembling idolatry. To ‘rob temples’ may have referred to Jews who robbed their own Temple in Jerusalem. They often robbed God

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by withholding part of their tithes and offerings. But Paul's reference to abhorring idols suggests that he had something else in mind in regard to temple robbery. It is possible that individual rogue Jews plundered pagan temples for purely mercenary reasons. The statement by the town clerk at Ephesus that Paul and his associates were not robbers of temples (Acts 19:37) suggests that it was not uncommon for Jews to be guilty of that offense. It is possible that, despite the clear Mosaic prohibition, the offending Jews rationalized such theft by thinking they were doing God a favor by striking a blow at paganism. But Paul condemns their hypocrisy. Their motive was not religious, but mercenary.

Many of the Jewish teachers and leaders were guilty of these offenses—and it was common knowledge. Everyone knew of cases where the most orthodox had left loopholes in their business dealings for a little 'refined stealing.' The Talmud itself charged three of its most illustrious rabbis with adultery. And while they abhorred idolatry and the dishonor of God, they had robbed God's temple by profaning sacred things, committing subtle forms of sacrilege. Even if they had not done these things overtly, spiritually they were guilty! Thus, in just a few sentences Paul does away with the false security that they could derive from having the truth. They were not okay. Their lives did not measure up to the truth they possess.

Why has Paul chosen examples of such serious and relatively infrequent activities to accuse Jews generally of failing to live out the law they reverence? How could his accusations be convincing to those Jews, surely in the majority, who had never stolen, committed adultery, or robbed a temple? It is not that all Jews commit these sins, but that these sins are representative of the contradiction between claim and conduct that *does* pervade Judaism. Paul may have chosen these particular sins in order to make a contrast with the commands of the Decalogue (if 'robbing temples' can be construed as a violation of the First Commandment) or to follow the pattern of other 'vice lists,' in which items such as murder, adultery, and sacrilege often appeared, or perhaps more likely, to show the equivalence between the sins of Jews and of Gentiles (cp. 2:3).

### *b) Blasphemy (2:23-24)*

#### (1) Dishonoring God (2:23)

<sup>23</sup>*You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.*

This verse, which is probably a statement rather than another rhetorical question, brings home to Paul's Jewish addressee the accusation developed in vv. 17-22. Whereas v. 17 spoke of the Jew 'relying on' the law, this verse heightens the sense by speaking of the Jew as 'boasting' in it. All such pride in the law – claims as to its antiquity and perfection, boasts about Israel as the people entrusted with the law – becomes insignificant and, indeed, damaging when the law is not obeyed. It is not boasting in the law that brings honor to God, but obedience to it.

The indictment of verse 24 makes it clear that the question in verse 23 was rhetorical. Many hypocritical Jews were blatantly breaking the divine Law they so proudly boasted in, and in doing so, they brought 'dishonor' to God.

#### (2) Blaspheming God (2:24)

<sup>24</sup>*For, as it is written, 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'*

Paul uses an OT quotation to confirm the conclusion he has drawn in v. 23. The quotation is probably from Isaiah 52:5. In Isaiah, the blaspheming of God's name occurs through the oppression of Israel, God's chosen people, by foreign powers. Paul ascribes the cause of

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blasphemy to the disobedient lives of His people. Perhaps Paul intends the reader to see the irony in having responsibility for dishonoring God's name transferred from the Gentiles to the people of Israel.

Not only do they not measure up to their privilege and presumption in having the truth, but they disgrace it! The sacred name of God that none of these religious Jews would ever repeat with his lips was because of them actually blasphemed by the Gentiles with whom they associated. God is not impressed by our claims of orthodoxy, and neither is the world. What *does* impress God and the world is an orthodoxy that produces a new life—an orthodoxy of action.

The Gentiles were blaspheming God for the way that the Jews were treating them. Non-churchgoers frequently complain that the church is full of hypocrites. Hypocrisy is a damnable thing, which is why our Lord was constantly rebuking the Pharisees, the masters of masquerading, who pretended to have a form of righteousness that they really did not possess. Christians do not pretend to be perfect. The church is filled with sinners, and being a sinner is the first qualification for joining a church. We have to be sinners to get in because it is not a place for perfect people. One reason people call us hypocrites is that they notice we are not perfect, but actually it is the hypocrite who claims to be more righteous than he is. That is a serious matter, and it is what Paul is talking about.

The principle applies even more strongly to Christians, because they not only have greater spiritual light through the New Testament but have greater spiritual resources to obey that light through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Those who claim to be Christians but persistently live in sin give evidence that they carry the name of Christ in vain. And because there is no difference between their standard of living and that of the world, the Lord's name is blasphemed.

When I hear Paul ask the Jews of his day, 'Are you counting on being saved just because you are Jews, when in fact you have been a blasphemy in the face of the nations?' I am certain that God is asking the same question of the so-called Christians of northern Europe and North America today. We are a blasphemy. That doesn't excuse the other side, the people without the Bible; as we have seen (1:18-2:16), they too will be judged. But we can't excuse ourselves. We can't say, 'We're the righteous ones. Surely God will protect us.' Why should He? We are a blasphemy against Him!

### **B. Circumcision (Romans 2:25-29)**

Circumcision, like the law, was a sign of the Jew's privileged position as a member of the chosen people, participant in the covenant that God established with Abraham (Gen. 17). Later Judaism claimed that 'no person who is circumcised will go down to Gehenna,' and the importance of the rite throughout the Second Temple period suggests that this view was prevalent in Paul's day also. But Paul goes even further. Not only does disobedience of the law endanger the circumcised Jew's salvation; obedience of the law can bring salvation to the uncircumcised Gentile. He here for the first time in the chapter also hints that it is the Christian, circumcised by the heart of God's Spirit, who is the 'true' Jew (v. 29).

#### **1. Physical Circumcision (2:25-27)**

There is another danger, a natural twin to the danger of thinking we are acceptable to God because we have the truth: namely, thinking we are right before the Lord because we are affiliated with His people. The Jews supposed they were secure because they were part of God's

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chosen people through circumcision. They believed circumcision somehow secured salvation. Rabbi Menachem, in his commentary on the Book of Moses, wrote, ‘Our Rabbis have said that no circumcised man will see Hell.’ Another said, ‘Circumcision saves from Hell.’ The midrash Tillim says, ‘God swore to Abraham that no one who was circumcised should be sent to Hell.’

God had instituted circumcision as a mark of His covenant with Abraham and his descendant. No doubt this surgery was symbolic of the sinfulness of man that was passed from generation to generation. The very procreative organ needed to be cleansed of a covering. So man at the very center of his nature is sinful and needs cleansing of the heart. This graphic symbol of the need for removing sin became the sign of being a Jew.

Circumcision was, in fact, more a mark of judgment and obligation than of salvation and freedom. It was a constant reminder to Jews of their sinfulness and of their obligation to obey God’s law (cp. Gal. 5:3). Circumcision was a mark of legal obligation. Long before Paul’s day the rite of circumcision had become so shrouded in superstition that ancient rabbis formulated sayings such as “no circumcised Jewish man will see hell” and ‘circumcision saves us from hell.’ But the prophets had made clear that mere physical circumcision had no spiritual power or benefit (Jer. 9:25-26).

### a) *The Circumcised (2:25)*

<sup>25</sup>*For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.*

The ‘for’ at the beginning of verse 25 relates this whole paragraph to an implied Jewish objection: How can we be treated the same as Gentiles (vv. 6-11), even to the point of being in danger of the wrath of God (cp. v. 5), when our circumcision marks us as belonging to God’s chosen people, heirs of the Abrahamic promises? Paul responds: circumcision ‘is of profit’ only if the law is done; if, on the other hand, the law is transgressed, one’s circumcision ‘has become uncircumcision.’ Paul is clearly contesting the value of circumcision per se. What specific ‘profit’ of circumcision is Paul contesting? In light of the context, with its focus on judgment and wrath, Paul must have in mind the efficacy of circumcision in shielding the Jew from the wrath of God.

This conclusion has important implications for a second question, the meaning of the phrase ‘if you practice the law.’ Two interpretations fit the context: 1) a heartfelt, faith-filled obedience to the stipulations of the covenant; 2) a perfect conformity to the letter of the law. If the former is adopted, then Paul would presumably regard this kind of ‘doing the law’ as possible, and his point would be that it is only when accompanied by that sincere and faithful response to God’s covenant stipulations that circumcision, the sign of the covenant, is of any value. With the second meaning, on the other hand, Paul would be setting forth the standard by which God judges, a standard of perfect conformity to God’s demands that no one can meet. In this case, circumcision would be of no ‘profit’ (in the sense of salvific profit) to anyone. A decision between these two options is difficult, but the second is to be preferred. Paul’s purpose in this section is not to indicate how circumcision is of value with respect to the covenant but to remove circumcision from the list of those things that the Jew might think would afford him an automatic pardon from the wrath of God.

These decisions help us to determine the meaning of Paul’s claim that transgressing the law turns one’s circumcision into ‘uncircumcision.’ If the profit of circumcision consists in protection from divine wrath, this phrase must, as its contrary, signify exposure to that wrath. To become

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uncircumcised means to become like a Gentile and to forfeit any defense that one's membership in the people of God might provide on the day of judgment.

As important as circumcision was as an act of obedience to God and as a reminder to Jews of their covenant relation to Him, the rite had no spiritual power. 'Circumcision is of value,' Paul explains, only 'if you practice the Law,' that is, live in obedience to God's will. To the faithful, obedient Jew, circumcision was a symbol of God's covenant, His blessings, His goodness, and His protection of His chosen people. 'But if you are a transgressor of the Law,' Paul warned, 'your circumcision has become uncircumcision,' that is, valueless. A Jew who continually transgressed God's law proved that he had no more saving relationship to God than a pagan Gentile, whom Jews often referred to as the uncircumcised.

The external rites of religion are not enough, in and of themselves. To the Jew the crucial external rite was circumcision; to the man with the Bible in our own generation it is baptism or confirmation or church membership. But such things, says Paul, are not helpful. In fact, they are harmful; they are no more than 'uncircumcision' unless there is a reality behind them.

Circumcision was of great value if one understood and lived its intended significance. However, if its meaning was disregarded, it was as meaningless as a wedding ring on an adulterer's finger. Faith and performance gave circumcision its reality.

### *b) The Uncircumcised (2:26)*

<sup>26</sup>*So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?*

If it is not circumcision but obedience to the law that determines whether one will be saved at the judgment, it follows as a consequence that a Gentile, the 'uncircumcised person,' can, if he or she obeys the law, be saved. Who are these uncircumcised Gentiles who keep the law and are saved on the day of judgment? We conclude that Paul is again here citing God's standard of judgment apart from the gospel as a means of erasing the distinction at this point between Jew and Gentile. Paul is not pointing the way to salvation but is showing Jews that their position, despite their covenant privileges, is essentially no different from that of the Gentiles: disobedience brings condemnation; obedience brings salvation.

The apostle's point is that the substance of pleasing God is obedience to His will, of which circumcision is but a symbolic reminder. Sincerely keeping 'the requirement of the Law' because it is God's will is of great value, whereas circumcision without obedience is of absolutely no value.

Paul is not for a moment saying that the person without the Bible is justified. Indeed, because these Gentiles do not keep their own standards, they too stand condemned in God's sight (2:1). Paul is simply saying, to the Jews of his day and to professing Christians today, 'Shame on you! There are people without the Bible, people without all the advantages you have, who live better lives than you live.' That doesn't excuse the man without the Bible, but oh how it condemns the man with the Bible!

We should not miss the revolutionary implications of what Paul suggests here. Circumcision was, after all, commanded in the law – yet Paul can say that people who are not circumcised can do the law. This assumption looks toward a new understanding of what the covenant is and what God requires of His people, an understanding that arises from the conviction that a new stage in salvation history has begun. Without directly describing Christians here, then, Paul's logic

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anticipates his teaching that it is faith and the indwelling of the Spirit that meet God's demand and so bring people into relationship with God.

### *c) Condemnation (2:27)*

<sup>27</sup>*Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law.*

Paul continues by logically turning to the other side of the coin. He is not exactly saying that uncircumcised Gentiles can keep the Law, but rather that if they do they will be reckoned as circumcised. Moreover, they then could be called to bear witness in judgment against the circumcised who have transgressed the law. In applying this to ourselves, all we have to do is substitute for the word 'circumcision' any of the following: church membership—baptism—confirmation—Methodist—Baptist—Presbyterian—and so on.

The belief that the righteous would sit in judgment over the unrighteous was widespread. But the Jewish tradition naturally cast Jews in the role of the righteous and Gentiles in that of the unrighteous. Paul reverses this customary scheme and, continuing his argument from verse 26, asserts that 'the uncircumcised person by nature who completes the law will judge you [e.g., the Jew], who, though having the letter and circumcision are a transgressor of the law' (cp. Mt. 12:41-43). This verse is a vivid reminder of the equality between Jew and Gentile with respect to judgment.

It is not that such Gentiles will perform the actual judgment, which is God's prerogative alone, but that their faithful obedience will stand as a rebuke to the faithless disobedience of hypocritical Jews.

The Greek word *gramma* means 'that which is inscribed or written,' and Paul is the only biblical author to use the term with reference to the law. In each case, he contrasts *gramma* with *pneuma*, 'spirit' (cp. v. 29 and Rom. 7:6; 2 Cor. 3:6-7). Paul is arguing in Romans 2 that Jews cannot depend on their covenant status, symbolized by the law and circumcision, for salvation. And the reason they cannot, he argues, is that they have transgressed the law by disobeying its precepts. Of course, a wrong heart attitude is one aspect of this problem (cp. vv. 28-29). But noting Paul has said in this chapter suggests that a faulty understanding of the law is part of the problem. Indeed, vv. 17-24, with their contrast between 'knowing God's will, being instructed through the law,' and 'breaking the law' show that it is not at the level of understanding but at the level of *doing* that the problem lies. This is typical of Paul's teaching throughout Romans, where the solution to the problem of sin is not a new or deeper understanding of the law, but faith in Christ.

Most likely, these shocking views in vv. 25-27 were without parallel among Jews of that era. In effect, Paul is redefining the covenant of God, no less. Jews believed that Gentiles *might* possibly be admitted to God's holy people, Israel, depending on the fulfillment of certain conditions, chief among which was circumcision. But it probably did not occur to them to consider that Jews themselves might no longer be in the covenant. Yet Paul is now preparing his Jewish reader for that very idea!

### **2. Spiritual Circumcision (2:28-29)**

Verses 28-29 explain why ('for') circumcision does not guarantee salvation and why its lack does not bar one from salvation. Paul argues by means of a contrast, with two denials in verse 28 being matched by two assertions in verse 29.

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### a) *The Contrast (2:28-29a)*

<sup>28</sup>*For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.*  
<sup>29</sup>*But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.*

The basic contrast in vv. 28-29 is an ‘inner’/‘outer’ contrast: a contrast between what can be seen with the eye (physical circumcision, Jewish birth) and what only God ultimately sees (the changed heart; ‘true’ Jewishness). The contrast between outward circumcision (done ‘in the flesh’) and the circumcision ‘done to the heart’ is well known in the OT and Judaism. From the earliest history of Israel, God called on the people to display the kind of inner transformation that could be called a circumcision of the heart (e.g., Dt. 10:16; cp. Jer. 4:4). Significantly, it was also recognized that only God could ultimately bring about this heart transformation (Dt. 30:6). The New Testament also describes a true believer in terms of inner circumcision (Col. 2:9-11).

In speaking of ‘circumcision...of the heart,’ Paul is echoing the words of the prophets before him who complained that through her disobedience to the Law of God given at Mt. Sinai Israel’s ‘heart’ was ‘uncircumcised’ (Dt. 10:16; 30:6), ‘hard,’ (Ez. 3:7), and ‘stone’-like, that is ‘dead’ (Ez. 11:19; 36:27). In verses 28-29, Paul sees God’s promises made by His prophets as now fulfilled. The hearts of believers are ‘circumcised’ by means of ‘the Spirit’ of God, not ‘by the letter (that is, the Law).’

Putting these two truths together, the apostle says that the true child of God, epitomized by the faithful Jew, is the person ‘who is one inwardly.’ The true mark of God’s child is not an outward symbol, such as circumcision, but a godly condition of the heart. Salvation comes ‘by the Spirit’ of God Himself working in a believer’s heart, not by the mere ‘letter’ of His Word, true as it is.

Paul’s ‘letter’/‘Spirit’ contrast is a salvation-historical one, ‘letter’ describing the past era in which God’s law through Moses played a central role and ‘Spirit’ summing up the new era in which God’s Spirit is poured out in eschatological fullness and power. It is only the circumcision ‘in the Spirit’ that ultimately counts.

For the first time, then, in Romans 2, Paul alludes to Christians. But even here it is only an allusion, since Paul is not so much describing a group of people as specifying what it is that qualifies a person to be a ‘true Jew’ and so to be saved. No outward rite can bring a person into relationship with God; with that many Jews would have agreed. But Paul goes beyond any first-century Jewish viewpoint in suggesting that physical circumcision is no longer required and in implicitly applying the term ‘Jew’ to those who were not ethnically Jews.

### a) *The Result (2:29b)*

*His praise is not from man but from God.*

The last clause in v. 29 picks up the outward/inward contrast of vv. 28-29a. The ‘true’ Jew, like the sincere worshiper (cp. Mt. 6:2-18), is praised not by people but by God. This praise, in keeping with the focus on judgment throughout Romans 2, is probably that praise with which God will honor His own people on the last day.

Paul’s radical point must not be missed. The ‘true Jew’ is no longer defined by blood descent from Abraham, by male circumcision and keeping ‘the letter’ given through Moses. There is now a new covenant based on: 1) the forgiveness of sins through the death and resurrection of

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Christ; and 2) the inner workings of the Spirit of God changing the ‘heart’ and inclining it voluntarily and spontaneously to keep the Law. This covenant, this new ‘circumcision,’ applies only to those who acknowledge Jesus as Messiah and Lord, regardless of whether they are Jews or Gentiles. The temporary era of Law has passed, superseded by the now permanent era of Christ and the Spirit (see 7:6; 8:3-4).

As we move into the third chapter of Romans, Paul says with great insistence that his Jewish readers need the Savior because they are under the wrath of God, even though they have had great spiritual advantages. Spiritual blessing, says Paul, is not an automatic result of one’s race or of one’s external adherence to a religious tradition. Any spiritual blessing we are to experience must come from a much deeper reality. Paul is parading all mankind before us—first Gentiles then Jews—trusting that as we look at them we will also see ourselves and realize that nothing we are, in and of ourselves, can save us from God’s justifiable wrath.

We must each consider the question, where does our confidence lie? Does it rest either on our knowledge of God’s Word or our religious affiliation? If so, we are deluded. True salvation is a matter of the heart.

For next time: Read Romans 3:1-20.