

29. The Book of Romans 2:23-29

Paul's Epistle to the Romans

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(9-13-23)

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Today we continue our journey through the Book of Romans and find ourselves in the first section of the book that falls under the heading of “**Condemnation.**”

In it Paul wants to prove that the whole human race, apart from Christ, is condemned by God—which means at one point He *will* judge the world.

This first section covers from 1:18-3:20—but tonight let's continue looking at 2:17-29 and a section that deals with *'false security.'*

→ Listen: Titanic Story of April 10, 1912 and thought to be 'unsinkable.'

As I said last time, people need to feel a sense of security in their lives if they're going to have peace.

I believe that everyone wants to live their life with a sense of security—whether it's economic, job, home, or national security—but I also believe that most people want *spiritual* security as well! This would encompass freedom from the fear of judgment because they have a sense of peace about meeting God someday—in other words, they feel safe from judgment in hell.

Now I realize that in the last 30 to 40 years or so, many people have rejected the idea that hell is a real place (even though Jesus said it was and talked about it more than anyone else in the Bible).

But for all the previous years of our nation's history the preaching of hell was a mainstay in pulpits all across America.

That fear kept many people from sin and created a mindset that drove them to their knees looking to get their lives right with God because—they *needed* to feel a sense of security about coming judgment.

As we said last time when we introduced this section—this is the very issue that Paul is dealing with in this section of Romans chapter 2 verses 17-29.

In this section Paul is addressing primarily the Jews who were the epitome of those who were *religious* and therefore had a sense of security and peace about coming judgment.

Unfortunately, it was *false* security and peace based on *false* information.

The Jewish people in Paul's day felt secure from God's judgment based on 3 primary things—

1. Their heritage—they were descendants of Abraham.

2. They had been given God's Law—*which exempted them from judgment*.
3. They were circumcised—*which brought them into the covenant God made with Israel*.

So, in this section Paul sets about to systematically destroy this false security that the Jews had barricaded themselves in.

He does so by showing them that: their heritage can't save them (verses 17-20); that having the Law can't save them (verses 21-24); and that circumcision won't save them either (verses 25-29).

But as we said last time—in so doing he dismantles every religious person's false assurance as we shall see—whether they are Catholic, Protestant or anyone else who is trusting in religious forms, ceremonies, and rituals that give them a sense of security—but cannot save them from judgment.

I. Heritage—verses 17-20

Romans 2:17–20 (NKJV)

¹⁷ Indeed you are called a Jew [their heritage], and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, ¹⁸ and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, ¹⁹ and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law.

II. The Law—verses 21-24

Romans 2:21–22 (NKJV)

²¹ You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? ²² You who say, “Do not commit adultery,” do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

The second basis for their false security was in that they possessed and preached God's Law. However, as Paul points out—possessing and preaching the Law does a person no good—if they're not going to practice it.

Paul indicts the Jews for their hypocrisy—because they were guilty of committing the very sins they condemned the Gentiles for committing.

A. “Stealing”—verse 21

B. “Adultery”—verse 22

C. “You who abhor idols, do you, rob temples?”—verse 22

Romans 2:23 (NKJV)

²³ You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law?

I think that this relates to so many who have grown up in the church, who look down on those who are unchurched—and yet are blind to their true standing before God.

Many who have grown up in the church are trusting in their Christian *heritage* to shield and protect them from the judgment coming upon the heathens. But even though growing up in church and hearing the Word of God

preached from week to week gives many religious churchgoers a great sense of pride, superiority, and security over the unchurched—it also brings with it a greater responsibility to obey what they hear.

In verse 21, Paul asks, “**Why then don’t you live what you learn, why don’t you practice what you preach?**”

1) Stealing—from your employer by not giving him or her your best, or coming in late, leaving early, taking long lunches, or sloughing off when you work from home?

2) Adultery (physical and mental)—as a married person by watching sexual themes in movies, on cable, or through internet pornography—lusting after others and fantasizing about having sex with them? (Matt.5:27-28)

3) Idolatry—understand that a person can be religious and hate idolatry (the worship of other gods) and still profit off of it.

In other words, they profit off of those who idolize sex by renting them videos (video store owners and employees)—or off of those whose god is *gambling, alcohol* or anything else they are consumed with other than the God of the Bible.

One author related this story—

“I heard a pastor say that he was asked to preach at a large church in another town. As the pastor of that church picked him up from the airport and was driving him to the church to speak, he noticed a number of large liquor stores in the town that they drove past. The visiting pastor commented on the size and number of those liquor stores. The pastor of the church in that town commented that the man who owned those stores went to his adult Sunday School class. When the visiting pastor asked if the man was convicted by the inconsistency of professing faith in Christ while profiting off of the sins of others, the pastor said, ‘Well he just believes that they’re going to buy their liquor from someone so it might as well be him.’”

I have a real problem with Christians who work on gambling boats or in casinos, who work in bars—or own liquor stores or any company where they are selling or promoting idolatry of any kind no matter what form it takes.

Romans 2:24 (NKJV)

²⁴ For “*the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,*” as it is written.

Here Paul quotes from Isaiah 52:2—

Isaiah 52:5 (AMP)

⁵ But now what have I here, says the Lord, seeing that My people have been taken away for nothing? Those who rule over them howl [with joy], says the Lord, and My name continually is blasphemed all day long.

Ezekiel 36:18–20 (NKJV)

¹⁸ Therefore I poured out My fury on them for the blood they had shed on the land, and for their idols *with which* they had defiled it. ¹⁹ So I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed throughout the countries; I judged them according to their ways and their deeds. ²⁰ When they came to the nations, wherever they went, they profaned My holy name—when they said of them, ‘These *are* the people of the Lord, *and* yet they have gone out of His land.’

Of course, this applies directly to any professing Christian who is living a life of hypocrisy—but especially, charlatan TV preachers and celebrity pastors fall into this category as well—especially when they fall.

(Mention the fall of Jimmy Swaggert and the message he gave before his fall where he came down on different Christian denominations for their sins and hypocrisy)

As Paul is saying—many unbelievers blaspheme the name of God because of the blatant hypocrisy of those whose lives don't match the faith they claim to hold so dear.

Pastor Stuart Briscoe told the story about having to deal with a fellow employee who had embezzled a large sum of money from the bank they both worked at.

"The reason the man embezzled was that he had two wives and families to support. When he was apprehended and fired, he stunned everyone by saying, *'I am very sorry for what I have done, and I need to know whether I should fulfill my preaching commitments on Sunday in our local church?'*

Briscoe says that in the following weeks he spent a great part of his time mending the damage done by that man's blatant inconsistency and hypocrisy. To his chagrin, he found that his fellow workers not only despised the man but were quick to dismiss the church he belonged to as a *'bunch of hypocrites,'* the gospel he professed to believe as *'a lot of hogwash,'* and the God he claimed to serve as *'nonexistent.'*"

We have all, unfortunately, heard the name of God blasphemed by unbelievers because of immoral actions by those who claim to be believers. We may assume that because we have the truth, we are okay, but this is a dangerous presumption. God is not impressed by our claims of orthodoxy, and neither is the world. What *does* bless God and impact the world is an orthodoxy which produces a new life—an orthodoxy of action."

Titus 1:16 (NKJV)

¹⁶ They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him...

Luke 6:46 (NKJV)

⁴⁶ "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do the things which I say?

Matthew 7:21–23 (NKJV)

²¹ "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.

So, the Jewish people in Paul's day felt secure from God's judgment based on 3 primary things—I. Their heritage; II. The Law, and III. Circumcision.

III. Circumcision—verses 25-29

Romans 2:25 (NKJV)

²⁵ For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.

The purpose of circumcision was 2-fold—**Identification** and **Illustration**.

A. Identification

It was a sign or symbol of the Abrahamic Covenant which identified them as God's covenant people—

Genesis 17:6–11 (NKJV)

⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an

everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you.⁸ Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”⁹ And God said to Abraham: “As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.¹⁰ This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised;¹¹ and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you.

B. Illustration

It illustrated a very important spiritual truth—that as God’s covenant people, He desired them to ‘*cut away*’ or to remove from their hearts and lives all that was unclean and walk with Him in purity, holiness, and obedience.

God made His intent clear with regards to this in various passages in the O.T.—

Deuteronomy 10:12–13, 16 (NKJV)

¹² “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul,¹³ and to keep the commandments of the Lord and His statutes which I command you today for your good?...¹⁶ Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.

Jeremiah 4:4 (NKJV)

⁴ Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, And take away the foreskins of your hearts, You men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, Lest My fury come forth like fire, And burn so that no one can quench *it*, Because of the evil of your doings.”

You see they began to confuse physical circumcision, which God only intended to be an outward ritual that *symbolized* an inward reality (a pure heart devoted to God)—and they began to look at it as though it *brought* them righteousness.

In other words, in their minds—circumcision equaled salvation!

- Rabbi Menachem commenting on Jewish circumcision said, *“Our Rabbis have said that no circumcised Jew will see hell.”*
- Another said, *“Circumcision saves from hell.”*
- The Midrash says, *“God swore to Abraham that no one who was circumcised should be sent to hell.”*

The rite of circumcision was a beautiful thing—it was like a wedding ring between God and the Jewish people which spoke of love and commitment—much like an actual wedding ring does in marriage.

A wedding ring is a symbol of the marriage covenant—it isn’t marriage, it only symbolizes marriage.

A married person can choose not to wear their wedding ring or if they should lose it—that doesn’t make them ‘unmarried’—they’re still be married in the eyes of God!

But even though a wedding ring is a beautiful symbol of the marriage covenant—which signifies a special relationship between a man and a woman based on commitment and fidelity—without the commitment and fidelity—it means nothing!

In fact, it's worse than nothing—it becomes a constant reminder of the pain, shame, and betrayal of forsaken love and broken commitment. So, just as a wedding ring means nothing if the commitment and loyalty that makes marriage genuine is broken—by the same token, circumcision was a sign (a symbol) of the Abrahamic Covenant and as such, it symbolized a special relationship between God and His people, Israel (His wife).

Again, circumcision was like a wedding ring between God and His covenant people Israel symbolizing something beautiful and special. Yet without their commitment to God manifested by their loyalty and obedience to Him—it meant nothing more than a wedding ring on the finger of an adulterer or an adulteress!

That's exactly what Paul says in verse 25-26:

Romans 2:25-26 (NKJV)

²⁵ For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. ²⁶ Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision?

It's possible that Paul is speaking *hypothetically* here—in other words, he's not suggesting that a Gentile *could* or *would* want to keep the Law—but if they could keep the Law *without* being circumcised—they would be more righteous in God's eyes than the Jew who was circumcised but *didn't* keep the Law.

However, it's more probable that Paul is beginning to transition into the next major section of the Book of Romans ("*Justification*") as he tells his readers that we aren't justified by the Law but by faith in Jesus Christ—climaxing in the statement:

Romans 3:21–22 (NKJV)

²¹ But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²² even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference [between Jews and Gentiles—we're all made righteous the same way—thru faith in Jesus Christ]...

Romans 2:27 (NKJV)

²⁷ And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you who, *even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law?*

Paul is going to tell us that the only way a Gentile (or a Jew) can fulfill the Law is by putting their faith in Jesus as their Savior (which is the ultimate point he is making).

And so, focusing on Gentiles who weren't given God's written Law and weren't circumcised but who put their faith in Jesus and were saved—

He makes the point that a Gentile believer in Christ (who is not circumcised) will judge (be a witness against) a Jew on the Day of Judgment who was circumcised but who didn't put their faith in Jesus as their Messiah and Savior—

Matthew 12:41 (NKJV)

⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah *is* here.

Luke 22:30 (NKJV)

³⁰ that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

As one pastor put it, far from being a blessing to the Jewish people circumcision was a liability in many ways—

“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. Speaking about the Judaizers, who were corrupting the church by teaching that Christians were obligated to keep the Mosaic law, Paul wrote, “I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law” (Gal. 5:3). Circumcision was a mark of legal obligation.”

Then Paul concludes with a statement that must have sent his Jewish audience into orbit—

Romans 2:28–29 (NKJV)

²⁸ For he is not a Jew who *is one* outwardly, nor *is* circumcision that which *is* outward in the flesh; ²⁹ but *he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter* [of the written Law]; whose praise *is not from men but from God.*

Paul is going to develop his statement more in the next section where he tells his Jewish readers that just because they’re descendants of Abraham and circumcised—doesn’t mean they are automatically saved and going to heaven.

He makes it a point to remind them that Abraham had two sons: Ishmael and Isaac—yet only Isaac was called the ‘*son of promise*’ (saved). His point is that even though a Jew has the *blood* of Abraham in their veins—they still need to have the *faith* of Abraham in their heart to be saved—and that Ishmael was both a son of Abraham and was circumcised—yet he wasn’t saved!

Then he points out to them that even Father Abraham was declared righteous by God on account of his faith (Genesis 15:6) as an uncircumcised man—and then 14 years later God commanded him to be circumcised (Genesis 17:6-11):

Romans 4:11–12 (NKJV)

¹¹ And he [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which *he had while still* uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, ¹² and the father of circumcision to those who not only *are* of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham *had while still* uncircumcised.

The question is—how does this apply to us as non-Jews?

Well, all we have to do is substitute the words ‘*baptism, confirmation, or church membership*’ for circumcision and apply it to many in the Church who are trusting in these things for their salvation—even as the Jews were clinging to circumcision for theirs.

Donald Grey Barnhouse adapts and applies Paul's words to those in the Church—

"For he is not a Christian who is one outwardly, nor is that church membership which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Christian who is one inwardly, and church membership is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter, whose praise is not of men, but of God."

Again, we could just as easily plug in 'water baptism' (elaborate and liken it to circumcision as the symbol of the New Covenant—a beautiful symbol if the commitment, love and obedience to Jesus is in place—remember that, just like circumcision didn't equal salvation it only symbolized salvation—water baptism isn't salvation, it only symbolizes salvation.)

J. Vernon McGee—

"This thought can be applied to our church sacraments. Water baptism is rightly a sacrament of the church, if it is the outward expression of a work of God in the heart. But it is a mockery if the person who is baptized gives no evidence of salvation. This also can be said of church membership. The lives of some church members make membership a mockery."

Unfortunately, false security based on false information (circumcision saves, baptism saves, church membership saves...etc.)—is rampant in Christian church circles today. Many church goers are looking to a ritual like water baptism (which God only intended to *represent* a spiritual reality)—and making the ritual itself the reality.

This false information is leading millions and millions of people to judgment in our day—as it has throughout the history of the Church!

I'm convinced that many of those pushing this false information (they believe it's the truth) really have people's best interests at heart—but it is still going to lead to their eternal destruction no matter how sincere and well intentioned those sharing it happen to be.

→ Listen for the story of a woman and her baby girl on a train in a blizzard who both died due to false information.

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