

## **Romans 2:17-28**

### **Introduction**

In the previous section Paul exposed the Gentile world's rejection of any knowledge of God they should have understood from creation. This rejection led to their not honoring God, to being darkened in their minds, and to destructive behaviors on an individual, interpersonal, and societal scale. God's surprising response (His wrath) was to give them over to their desires rather than destroying them.

Paul then exposed the Gentile moralist who would have written similar condemning statements about his world but failed to realize his/her own sin and failed to see God's patience and kindness as a motivation to repent.

Lastly, Paul addressed the Jew who took pride in possessing and hearing Torah read. Paul demonstrated that Gentiles, whom they would have condemned for their immoral lives, instinctively do the things of the law at times while the Jew at times breaks the law. The conclusion is that God will deal with everyone, Jew and Gentile, with impartiality.

"Using the same rhetorical technique in 2:17-28 as he used in 2:1-6, Paul now critiques a nationalistic Jewish teacher of Gentiles who would agree with Paul's evaluation of Gentile culture. Perhaps Paul is reflecting the same line of thinking he once held before his encounter with the risen Jesus. The teacher's solution would be to have the Gentiles observe certain "works of the law" that will, he assumes, effectively allow them to overcome their various sins. Paul uses several rhetorical techniques to teach the teacher (1) that the teacher cannot stand apart from those he judges because (2) he demonstrates a self-defeating hypocrisy, an ignorance of the fundamental equality of Jew and Gentile in sin, and a lack of understanding and sympathy with God's way of bringing Jews and Gentiles under sin into covenant relationship with himself through Jesus. Paul focuses on circumcision the last half of this section as an example of the "works of law" the Jew put so much trust in" (Fredenburg: Introductory statement to his translation on this section).

### **Rely on Law: 2.17-24**

From the time of the Maccabean period (2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E.) when Israel revolted against the Seleucids because of their attempt to impose Greek culture upon the Jew and their desecration of the temple in Jerusalem, the word "Jew" became a self-designation of distinctiveness from the rest of the world. It became a wall of separation over against the rest of the world.

The Jew relied on the possession of Torah as a sign of God's favor and as the key to overcoming sin. Possessing Torah was one of the things at the heart of what it meant to be Jew. They boasted in being the exclusive people of God. Because they possessed Torah, they believed they possessed superior knowledge and were the only ones who understood the will of God. The statements made in verses 19 and 20 are similar to statements describing the Jews in their own writings. Dunn (pg. 113) states the two words "knowledge" and "truth" were, "the highest claims and aspirations of religion and philosophy in the ancient world."

Paul exposed the flaw in their thinking. If possessing the law gave them such

superiority over against the rest of the world, what does the fact that some Jews transgress the law say about that superiority? Paul was not suggesting that all Jews did the things listed here. His point is that their nationalistic exclusive boasting in the law crumbles with the truth that there are Jews who break the law. The fact that Jews who possessed the law broke the law proved the law gave them no advantage over the non-Jew. In fact, such law breaking dishonors God just as the Gentile behavior described in 1:18ff dishonored God. This would have been shocking to the Jews who heard this read.

Verse 24 is a quote from Isaiah 52:5. In that text Israel was under the domination of pagan nations because of their sin, which gave the pagan world reason to dishonor God. But the problem Paul was addressing was even bigger than sins that led to others dishonoring God. “It is not just particular acts of transgression, but the whole attitude to the law expressed in the previous verses, which amounts to a perversion of God’s purpose for Israel and the nations, and which results in the nations continuing to regard God simply as the national God of a small nation and thus to dishonor him who is the only God, God of all” (Dunn, pg. 116). The Jew did not recognize the universal scope of God’s redeeming purpose for the world.

### **Rely on Circumcision: 2:25-28**

Here Paul narrowed his discussion to the subject of circumcision. Circumcision held a special place when it came to the expression of covenant loyalty and what it meant to be Jew. The covenant of circumcision in Genesis 17 relates specifically to Abraham’s offspring. God described it as an everlasting covenant to Abraham’s offspring. Any male who was not circumcised was to be cut off from the people because he had broken the covenant (Gen. 17:14). It was a fundamental part of practicing Torah and its importance to the Jew can hardly be overstated.

While other nations practiced circumcision, it came to be seen as something that was particularly Jewish. Jews and Gentiles alike used the words “circumcised” and “uncircumcised” to communicate their separateness and conflict with one another. Although an extreme situation, the importance of circumcision to at least some Jews can be seen during the days of the Hasmonean rule of Judea when they forced circumcision upon the Idumeans (South of Judea) and Ituraeans (Gallilee). Note the words of Jubilees 15:26, 27 (135-105 B.C.E).

“And every one that is born, the flesh of whose foreskin is not circumcised on the eighth day, belongs not to the children of the covenant which the Lord made with Abraham, but to the children of destruction; nor is there, moreover, any sign on him that he is the Lord's, but (he is destined) to be destroyed and slain from the earth, and to be rooted out of the earth, for he has broken the covenant of the Lord our God.”

Contrary to popular belief of his day, Paul stated that circumcision is only of value if the law is obeyed. The fact that Jews still sin even though having the law and the covenant of circumcision should have exposed their pride in law and circumcision as being misguided. Circumcision has no value when law is broken. In reality, breaking law reverses the initial surgery. It becomes uncircumcision.

As he did with his discussion of the law, Paul made the point that some uncircumcised people do a better job of practicing parts of the law than do some who are circumcised. By their lives the uncircumcised condemn those Jews who do not practice the law. The idea that a Gentile could condemn a Jew through their lives would have been a scandalous thought in Paul's day. Paul was trying to get them to understand there is no place for national boasting in having been circumcised. Sin within Israel should have undermined any national boasting in circumcision.

So how is a true Jew identified? Possessing the law and being physically circumcised is not the defining characteristic of what it means to be Jew. It has always been those whose heart is circumcised, who is one inwardly, that is a true Jew (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4).

This text is not calling a Gentile who instinctively follows some of the law a true Jew or a covenant member. Paul used the sometimes goodness of Gentiles to challenge the belief that being a physical descendent of Abraham and being circumcised protected the Jew from the implications of their sin, and challenged their belief that God dealt more favorable when they sinned just because they were circumcised. The true Jew here is a physical descendent of Abraham who is circumcised not only physically but also of the heart.

Bringing in the aspect of "spiritual" (v. 29) in the discussion has overtones of the new covenant spoken of in the prophets (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:26, 27). God fulfilled His promised blessings through the death and resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of His Spirit. Neither circumcision nor law can free anyone from the power of sin and death. Only Jesus and God's Spirit can do that.

## **Conclusion**

It would be incorrect to say that Paul was against ritual or keeping law. But to make such things the source of one's relationship with God dishonors God. This discussion is about the covenant faithfulness of God, not the ability of humanity to fulfill some obligation to the covenant because humanity cannot fulfill covenant obligations.

Covenant relationship with God is not some special privilege for any one group. God is the God of all his creation and His redemption of the world is equally for all regardless of ethnicity, economics, gender, or any other barrier that humans tend to put up. God set his heart to love Israel, but not to the exclusion of the rest of the world. In fact, God loved Israel so that through them He could demonstrate his love for the world and fulfill His promises to the world.

The typical Jew of Paul's day boasted in the possession of law and in circumcision. They took nationalistic pride in their favored status with God, a status they believed was unbreakable, and saw others as being excluded from that favored status. Even those who became proselytes were never seen as having the same relationship with God as did the physical Jew. Even when they sinned, they believed God treated them so differently that breaking the law would not necessarily cost a Jew covenant membership or a place in the age to come. While God might discipline them and test them, He would never punish or destroy them as He would other nations. The Jews special status with God could not fully be enjoyed by anyone else.

Paul exposed their assumptions. Although having the law and being circumcised, the Jew broke the law, sometimes even more than some Gentiles. Their breaking of the

law dishonored God just as much as the sin of Gentiles dishonored God. God is impartial. All sin. Some kind of national trust in law or circumcision has no value. God has made a covenant with the whole world. All, as will be seen in this letter, can partake of the blessings of the covenant on the same basis of trust in God. God is impartial!

Today's Christians may think the Jews of Paul's day were foolish to put so much trust in the law and in circumcision. But some today have their identity markers. It may be baptism, weekly communion, non-instrumental worship, or something else. How one treats their family, conducts their business, or behaves in general can sometimes be of little concern as long as the identity markers are covered. Putting trust in what we do instead of what God has done through Jesus is just as possible today as it was in Paul's day. It is also just as easy to build walls of exclusion within a congregation or within Christianity on a broader scale that God has not built.

**Romans**  
**2.17-29**

1. According to this text, what did the Jews of Paul's day rely upon?
2. How did these things affect the way they looked at the rest of the world? What impact would it have had in the church in Rome?
3. What evidence did Paul give to demonstrate the foolishness of such reliance?
4. What do you think were the most shocking statements from the perspective of the Jew that Paul made? Why?
5. In what ways can we today fall into the same trap as the Jew?