

ROMANS 2:17-29 "Praise God For The Circumcision From Above"

Romans 2:17-29 ¹⁷ But if you bear the name "Jew " and rely upon the Law and boast in God, ¹⁸ and know *His* will and approve the things that are essential, 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 a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth, ²¹ you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? ²² You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? ²⁴ For "THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU," just as it is written. ²⁵ For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. ²⁶ So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? ²⁷ And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter *of the Law* and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law? 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 which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

Paul's love for all men everywhere prompted him to give people the truth. To the Gentile, he gave the reality that idols and false prophets were of no eternal value and that only Jesus Christ could redeem them from the penalty of their sin.

To the Jew, Paul gave sobering truth of their own relationship with the one true God and how that relationship was based on faith, not on written codes given from God. In their case, they confused obedience to the law with a way to earn favor with God, when in fact, obedience to the law was to be the outcome of their faith in God.

They also relegated their standing before God to a mere physical relationship with their father Abraham and boasted in their flesh through God's covenant with Abraham, through circumcision, and stood upon that as sufficient. But Paul would have none of that.

Romans 4:1-3 ^{NAU} ¹ What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS."

Galatians 5:6 ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.

The O.T. scriptures were pointing the Jew to the Messiah to come, who would, as Isaiah put it in Isa 53:5-6 "[he] pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Our text in Romans is a plea to the Jew to consider their waywardness. As Paul has been explaining, one cannot earn favor with God through a mere obedience to the covenantal laws. But, Paul goes a step further by showing them that if they were depending on a mere association with the law for their salvation, their lack of obedience to it was the third strike against them.

Paul begins his indictment of the Jew by reminding him of God's blessings bestowed on them.

Rom 2:17-21 "Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; ¹⁸ if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; ¹⁹ if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth-- ²¹ you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? ..."

Paul recognizes the advantages, which the Jews possess, but stresses that boasting in those things is evil. What the Jew had was a relationship based on a covenant with God which God made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They also had divine knowledge of God's will for them. This was no small thing.

But their boasting was in these advantages, not in the God who gave them. They were busy telling the Gentile world what misfits they were because they didn't have this favored nation position,

instead of extending the grace of God and His truth to these people.

They were boasting in the wrong things and then saying that, despite their actions, God was still with them. The prophet Micah spoke of this type of attitude when he wrote, over 700 years prior to Paul's writing.

Mic 3:11 "Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money. Yet they lean upon the LORD and say, "Is not the LORD among us? No disaster will come upon us."

That's boasting in a lie and acting as though God will look the other way. That's not the kind of lead you want to follow, and that's Paul's point when he says: Rom 2:19 ... you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark..."

Here's what Jesus Himself says of this in Mat 15:14 "Leave them; they are blind guides of the blind. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit."

Paul is telling them, 'you've already fallen, reach up to the light of life in Christ Jesus and quit boasting in yourselves.'

He tells them that they're so busy teaching others they've forgotten to teach themselves.

Rom 2:21-23 ... "You who preach against stealing, do you steal? 22 You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? 23 You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?"

For Paul these are rhetorical questions with the implied answer, yes! And yet, these Jews may very well have been able to say, 'no Paul, we have not stolen, we have not committed adultery, we have not robbed temples, we have not broken the law.'

But Paul's point here is much deeper. And this was Jesus' point in the Sermon on the Mount. Our Lord gave the people not just the letter of the law, but the Spirit of the law, which they had pushed to the side because of their pride.

Mat 5:21-22,27-28,43-44 "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother without cause will be subject to judgment." 27 "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' 28 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." 43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,..."

Jesus was taking the law to new heights for these Jews. And yet the irony is that this is what God had always taught in His law. The people had twisted and rearranged what God had said, and limited the meaning to their own misguided ways.

Paul was telling the Jew that they were the blind leading the blind and boasting in what they believed was the truth; their own self-righteousness.

There's a message here for the Christian as well. There are those in the church-at-large who believe that their only duty to God is to go through the motions of church, while leaving their Christianity behind closed doors.

Going to church on Sunday or mid-week, putting money in the box, and then boasting in that, as if we've done God a favor, while the rest of the week we are living as though God were on vacation, is not what God means by living unto Him.

And I know there are Christians who would say, 'but I do what is pleasing to God and I've always been faithful to contend for the faith', and yet some of these same Christians hate their brother or sister, lust in their hearts after someone or something like money, constantly judging others, while setting themselves up as the standard and boasting in their "good works".

Now chances are that most of us may have someone else flash in our minds when such indictments are made, but the truth is we all need to be careful not to make our walk with Christ in outward appearance only, while having our hearts walking in a different direction.

This is what the Lord told the prophet Samuel.

1Sa 16:7 "...The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

If our hearts are seeking to please our God, and to love Him above all, then what proceeds from that loving heart will be the kind of works which will not only be beneficial to men, but will in fact honor Christ.

This is what the apostle had in mind when he wrote in 2Co 3:2-3 "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. 3 You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."

In other words, you shall know we are Christians by our love. That kind of love will not be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. That kind of love will be patient when wronged. It will be kind when tempted to return evil for evil.

That kind of love will not be jealous of others, and it will not be boastful or arrogant. It will not act in an unbecoming way; it will not seek its own will or way to the exclusion of God's will, nor will it rejoice in unrighteousness, but instead it will rejoice with the truth.

That kind of love will bear all things, believe all things pertaining to God and holiness, hope in all things in which God promises, and endure all things with patience and thanksgiving, in the strength of the Spirit, as we wait upon the Lord.

Being a Christian is being real, but it's being a servant who understands we've been bought at a great price, not to do our bidding, but to honor our God who sent His Son to buy us back and take us off the path of destruction and place our feet on solid ground, on the hope of our salvation.

That's what Paul wanted for these Jews. He's saying, 'don't play the game of godliness, be the kind of people who admit you're sinners, but sinners saved by grace, seeking daily the power and love of Christ, to live lives to glorify God.

There are religious people, in word only, who boast of great things, and yet deny the truth, by their lack of Christ's love, which should show the Spirit working in their lives.

Paul describes them in his second letter to Timothy.

2Ti 3:2-5 "People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, 3 without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, 4 treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God-- 5 having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them."

In other words don't follow their lead and don't be conformed into their image by following after them. And Paul confirms this to the Romans.

Rom 12:2-3 "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will. 3 For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you."

Praise God for the life you have in Christ and seek the things above, not the things which can pull us back into the world. And seek the Spirit who enables us to walk after the love of Christ.

Back to our text. Rom 2:24 "As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." [Isaiah 52:5; Ezek. 36:22]

What the Jews thought was pleasing to God was actually a cause for dishonoring Him.

This verse is taken from Isa 52:5 "And now what do I have here?" declares the LORD. "For my people have been taken away for nothing?, and those who rule them mock, declares the LORD. "And all day long my name is constantly blasphemed."

The Jews were defeated by their enemies, and because of that, the Gentiles mocked them and their God. But Paul's implication is not just that the Jews were taken captive, but that disobedience caused God to judge their unrighteousness and to orchestrate their captivity, and that because of their disobedience, they mocked God.

You see God's name is at stake. His holiness and greatness is being trampled upon, and He takes it personally. You and I are His ambassadors. As ambassadors we are given the privilege and responsibility to represent the living God. This privilege was first given to the Jewish nation, but they abused it and dishonored the Lord.

And yet in God's grace and mercy He implores them to return and repent of their sin by embracing their Messiah, which many of them did. Unfortunately, many did not.

Many of them continued to rely on the law and the Abrahamic covenant as a means of salvation. One of the signs of the covenant was circumcision.

Rom 2:25-28 "Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. 26 If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? 27 The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker. 28 A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical."

Paul anticipated the response from the Jew as, 'well I may not obey the law perfectly, but you cannot deny my being part of the covenant of God, and my circumcision will prove that, and is my badge for acceptance with God no matter what.'

Paul says, 'is that so?' Well, circumcision does have some value if you keep the law, but don't think you can boast in your flesh when your heart is far away from God. In fact, he says, 'if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised.'

In other words, cutting off the flesh is no substitute for obedience from a loving heart to God. Observing the letter of the law, by observing circumcision, and yet walking outside the law, is of no value.

Now, what is the significance of circumcision? When God made a covenant or agreement with Abraham to be his God, the Lord said, 'this is the way I will ratify the covenant and let the world know that you are mine.'

'You shall cut off the foreskin which shall be a sign of your allegiance to Me in the Spirit and not in the flesh.' Getting rid of the flesh, and the desire and will of the flesh, was the whole point here.

But, the Jew was boasting in the very thing which pointed to how the flesh was fleshly, and always moving away from God. For the Jew, it was to be a humbling reminder of how the flesh could not accomplish the things of the Spirit.

In fact Paul says, 'look just because your flesh has been cut off, which is the sign of your belonging to God's covenant, doesn't mean that you can act out of accord with that covenant, which clearly said that if you disobey God you will be judged according to your deeds.'

And then Paul goes so far as to say that the Gentiles who do not possess this covenant sign, when they keep the requirements of the law, they become your judge, the very people whom you have been judging.

'And so in the process your circumcision has become as uncircumcision because of your disobedience and their (the Gentiles) uncircumcision, in the midst of their keeping of the requirements, has become circumcision.'

Now to the Jew this was blasphemy. But, Paul's point is not to suggest that the Gentiles' obedience to the written codes of God could earn them favor with God, but rather he's simply making a point, that the Jews could not depend on physical signs to save them while they were rebelling against God by rejecting His Messiah, who came to give eternal life to all who would repent and believe.

And he wraps it up by saying in Rom 2:28-29 "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. 29 No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God."

There is much said today regarding the nation of Israel as being a chosen people with whom God is not yet finished and will one day restore as a nation. And much of this idea comes from the prophetic word that time and time again says that God will restore His people Israel.

But what has been missing in this discussion is what the revealed word of God has already said on such a notion as Israel, the nation, being restored to her former glory.

Jeremiah 3:8 ⁸ "And I saw that for all the adulteries of faithless Israel, I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce, yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear; but she went and was a harlot also.

God tells us in His word that He hates divorce, but He did make provision for divorce in cases of adultery, and this is precisely what God has done with the nation of Israel. God has handed that nation a formal written notice of divorce, not simply a separation, but an entire covenantal cutting off of the nation of Israel as the representative of God in this world.

But someone may call foul at this point and say, you have misrepresented God's desire for the nation since you didn't read the rest of the context in Jeremiah where God promises to restore Israel to the former relationship. Let's quickly examine the rest of that text.

Jeremiah 3:9-19 ⁹ "Because of the lightness of her harlotry, she polluted the land and committed adultery with stones and trees. ¹⁰ "Yet in spite of all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to Me with all her heart, but rather in deception," declares the LORD. ¹¹ And the LORD said to me, "Faithless Israel has proved herself more righteous than treacherous Judah. ¹² "Go and proclaim these words toward the north and say, 'Return, faithless Israel,' declares the LORD; 'I will not look upon you in anger. For I am gracious,' declares the LORD; 'I will not be angry forever. ¹³ 'Only acknowledge your iniquity, That you have transgressed against the LORD your God And have scattered your favors to the strangers under every green tree, And you have not obeyed My voice,' declares the LORD. ¹⁴ 'Return, O faithless sons,' declares the LORD; 'For I am a master to you, And I will take you one from a city and two from a family, And I will bring you to Zion.' ¹⁵ "Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding. ¹⁶ "It shall be in those days when you are multiplied and increased in the land," declares the LORD, "they will no longer say, 'The ark of the covenant of the LORD.' And it will not come to mind, nor will they remember it, nor will they miss *it*, nor will it be made again. ¹⁷ "At that time they will call Jerusalem 'The Throne of the LORD,' and all the nations will be gathered to it, to Jerusalem, for the name of the LORD; nor will they walk anymore after the stubbornness of their

evil heart. ¹⁸ "In those days the house of Judah will walk with the house of Israel, and they will come together from the land of the north to the land that I gave your fathers as an inheritance. ¹⁹ "Then I said, 'How I would set you among My sons And give you a pleasant land, The most beautiful inheritance of the nations!' And I said, 'You shall call Me, My Father, And not turn away from following Me.'

There's a lot here but I want to key in on where the Lord is ultimately going with this promise to Israel which is found in verses 14-19. These verses speak of "those days to come", and then He defines those days where the ark of the covenant is no longer in Israel, nor will it be made again. During "those days" they will call Jerusalem, "the throne of God and all the nations will be gathered to it. In "those days" they will receive the inheritance of the land.

Surely, this is God bringing the nation of Israel back to Jerusalem. Surely, with Israel back in the land today God is preparing to fulfill these promises in the near future. But the promise was always based on faith and obedience as they acknowledge their iniquity. None of this has taken place, despite them being in the land today.

Israel, the present nation, is still stiff-necked, rebellious and rejecting the Messiah Jesus. They may be back in the land but it has nothing to do with their repentance and faith in the Messiah. But this does raise the question as to what Israel is being spoken of in this passage in Jeremiah, because this "Israel" is put into the context of having received the inheritance of the land as Jerusalem is called the throne of God and all the nations will be gathered to it. Where have we seen this language before?

Revelation 15:4 ⁴ "Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy; For ALL THE NATIONS WILL COME AND WORSHIP BEFORE YOU, FOR YOUR RIGHTEOUS ACTS HAVE BEEN REVEALED."

Revelation 21:24-27 ²⁴ The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵ In the daytime (for there will be no night there) its gates will never be closed; ²⁶ and they will bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it; ²⁷ and nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

What precisely is it that the kings of the earth will bring their glory into and of which they will walk by its light? The context of Revelation 21 is clear. Let's back up a few verses.

Revelation 21:1-7 ^{NAU} Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer *any* sea. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, ⁴ and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." ⁵ And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true." ⁶ Then He said to me, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. ⁷ "He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son..

This is what Jeremiah is declaring regarding Israel. This "Israel" will most certainly be in the land, (the New Earth and Heavens), and they will worship before the Lord their God, each one whose name has been written in the Lamb's book of life.

This "Israel" is not a nation tied to the physical descendants of Abraham of whom the Jews call their father. Jesus made it clear to which father the Jews of Israel belonged to.

John 8:44-45 ⁴⁴ "You are of *your* father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own *nature*, for he is a liar and the father of lies. ⁴⁵ "But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me.

Jesus and His word make it clear which Israel belongs to Him and it is pointed out in our text.

Rom 2:28-29 "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. ²⁹ No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God."

Paul further identifies this “Israel” when writing to the Galatians as he brings up to them this issue of the law and circumcision.

Galatians 6:14-16 ¹⁴ But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. ¹⁵ For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. ¹⁶ And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy *be* upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

The “Israel of God” is the same Israel of whom Peter speaks using the same covenantal language that was associated many years before with the nation of Israel. That nation was seen as a chosen race, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession.

1 Peter 2:9-10 ⁹ But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR *God's* OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; ¹⁰ for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY.

Who is this “Israel of God”, the true Israel of whom we cry out, Abba Father? It is everyone, both Jew and Gentile, who has placed their faith in the Messiah Jesus and who receive the inheritance promised in Christ to His people, the same inheritance that was promised to Abraham and to which he longed to receive even though he never possessed it in this life.

Hebrews 11:8-10 ⁸ By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign *land*, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; ¹⁰ for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

This is precisely the inheritance we see in Revelation 21 that we saw earlier. You and I in Christ share in this inheritance.

1 Peter 1:3-5 ³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to *obtain* an inheritance *which is* imperishable and

undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, ⁵
who are protected by the power of God through faith for a
salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

God will fulfill all of His promises to Israel, the true Israel that He
has called out from all people's of the world, both Jew and Gentile
to make one new people for His honor and glory.

Ephesians 2:13-16 ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly
were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For
He Himself is our peace, who made both *groups into* one and
broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, ¹⁵ by abolishing in His
flesh the enmity, *which is* the Law of commandments *contained* in
ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one
new man, *thus* establishing peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile them
both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to
death the enmity.

As Paul tells us in our text a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision
is a circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit.

Praise God for the circumcision which He has done in our hearts,
and may we live in that circumcision, as we seek the Spirit and His
power, as we put off the old man and put on the new in Christ
everyday of our lives to His honor and glory!