

## Romans: The Revealing of Righteousness (part 7 of 9)

### Hypocrisy vs True Obedience

Romans 2:17-29

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*“But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.” (Romans 2:17–29, ESV)*

For the last four Sundays, we have been looking at the dark side of the human condition. We began this journey into our depravity in Romans 1:18, and it continues through Romans 3:20. We have covered a lot of ground, so let me just review where we are in Paul’s argument regarding the contrast between our righteousness and the righteousness that God gives.

I have tried to connect every week to the overarching theme of this section, which is the righteousness of God revealed through the gospel. After seeing the good news in the first 17 verses, we have seen the following:

- The tragedy of unbelief and its consequences (1:18-23)
- The specific expressions of the exchange of God’s glory for our own as it relates to sin in general, but also as it relates to sexuality and homosexuality (1:24-32)
- We learned about the warnings to religious people, as Paul specifically addressed Jews who would read his letter (2:1-11)
- Last week we explored the impartiality of God in terms of His judgment and how merely possessing the Law or knowing what is right does not prevail over doing what is right (2:12-16)

So Paul is explaining who we really are. Whether a person is a Gentile or a Jew, whether religious or irreligious, God’s judgment is impartial because, at the core of our humanity, we have all fallen short of God’s glory (Romans 3:23).

Some people express their depravity through their utterly godless lives, while others express it through the appearance of spirituality.

## **Spiritual Status Symbols vs True Spirituality**

It is important to keep in mind that chapter two is specifically written to the spiritually-minded crowd, especially and specifically the Jews. Paul knew that there was a real danger that they might be inclined to think that they were less guilty because of their special relationship with God.

Last week Paul went after one of the Jews' most cherished possessions: the Law. But there are other expressions of Jewish spirituality that also need to be addressed. Our text today walks us through other areas which might have given a Jewish person confidence that he or she had arrived from a spiritual standpoint. And our text even addresses the single most important symbol of Jewish uniqueness and God's covenant: circumcision.

Paul's aim here is to show us that spiritual status symbols do not equal true spirituality. If last week was about God's impartiality, this week is about true spirituality. Paul walks us through this by addressing their confidence, the consequences, true circumcision and then some conclusions. So let's see his vision for what real spirituality is all about.

### **1. Misguided Confidence**

Paul begins his argument by identifying ten things that related to what it meant to be Jewish. Each of them was a result of the special relationship that God had with His people. So you could think of these as spiritual status symbols, and that is why Paul begins with the statement "If you call yourself a Jew . . . "

The list that follows in verses 17-22 is made up of things that were entirely true. Paul is not accusing them of falsifying their special status as God's people. Israel was, and remained, God's chosen people (Rom. 3:1-3), and God's relationship with them was meant to say something to the world.

*"For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt." (Deuteronomy 7:6-8, ESV)*

The problem, however, was that this special status and privilege became the soil in which their self-righteousness grew.<sup>1</sup> Their confidence was misguided, and Paul lists a series of advantages and their calling as God's people as the basis for a very serious charge.

The first set of five things relates to the blessings of the Jews as God's people. Everything listed is good, and each marked their unique relationship with God:

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<sup>1</sup> Robert H. Mounce, Romans, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995). 98.

- **“rely on the law”** – The Jewish people were given their identity by God through the Law after their Exodus from Egypt. This phrase does not mean that they did not rely on God. Rather, it means that the Law was a means of spiritual blessing (see Psalm 19:7-11).<sup>2</sup>
- **“boast in God”** – This would have been an appropriate boasting in God’s mercy and kindness to them (see Jeremiah 9:24ff).
- **“know his will”** – The people of Israel had been blessed by knowing God’s will as mediated through the commandments of God. The Law mercifully identified who God was and what He desired. The other nations of the world were not given this blessing.
- **“approve what is excellent”** – This idea follows the knowledge of His will, namely, that God helped His people understand what was the best way to live.
- **“instructed from the law”** – We have a summary statement here that captures the previous items. Jews had been blessed with spiritual knowledge from God’s Law.

Again, let me emphasize that this is a great list and that there was nothing wrong with any of this. What is more, it was all true. So Paul has just listed things with which every Jew would have agreed.

Paul does not stop there. He lists another five things that relate to Israel’s understood mission in the world:

- **“you are a guide to the blind”** – The Jewish people, through the Messiah, would be able to help those who were spiritually blind (Isa. 42:7).
- **“a light to those who are in darkness”** – Israel was to be a light to the surrounding nations, and the Law was supposed to be that light (Isa. 42:6, Ps 119:105).
- **“an instructor of the foolish”** – Instruction was designed to be the way that Israel helped the other nations of the world.
- **“a teacher of children”** – The words “foolish” and “children” are synonymous, so this is a restatement of the previous idea.
- **“having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth”** – It seems that we have here another summary statement that highlights the centrality of the Law in the life and identity of Israel.

What do we make of this list? The things listed here represent an excellent summary of how a spiritually-minded Jew would have seen him or herself, and nothing listed is either inaccurate or arrogant. God intended for the nations of the world to come to Jerusalem because those nations observed the uniqueness and the blessing of God upon the people of Israel (see Isaiah 2:1-4 and Micah 4:1-4).<sup>3</sup> So what we have seen here fits with that vision.

However, verses 17-20 are not merely a recitation of the blessings of Israel and her God-given mission. It is a set-up for what comes next. The problem is that Israel enjoyed all of these blessings and then allowed these things to become badges of self-righteousness. Their confidence in their Jewish identity became misguided, and Paul is about to show them the problem.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998). 129

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

## 2. Significant Consequences

Verse 21 is where Paul's tone shifts dramatically, and he does so in order to highlight that the Jews have failed to live up to their spiritual status and calling. Even the Greek text, which is translated "you then," shows us that Paul is drawing a conclusion here and is making a very important point.

Paul uses four rhetorical questions to highlight the failure of their spirituality. The first question is really most important because it serves as the theme for the rest of the list.

- v 21 – "you . . . who teach others, do you not teach yourself?"
- v 21 – "While you preach against stealing, do you steal?"
- v 22 – "You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?"
- v 23 – "You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?"<sup>4</sup>

With a failure to teach oneself as the main thought, Paul draws upon the Ten Commandments to make his point. He is using their special status and their calling to "teach the world" as the basis of the charge of hypocrisy. Paul is suggesting that they were guilty of the very things that they preached against.

Now remember why he is doing this. Paul is making the case that both Jews and Gentiles are guilty before God. Candidly, it is harder to convince spiritually-minded, obedience-focused, moralistic people that they are in fact guilty. That is why Paul spends so much time on this subject. And it is why he is rather shocking in what he says next.

Paul's words are meant to be sharp and penetrating:

*"You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'"* (Romans 2:23–24, ESV)

To boast in the Law while still breaking it is not only hypocritical; it is dishonoring to God. Paul is dismantling their trust in their special status as God's people, and he is, once again, showing them that obedience is what really matters. Possessing the Law or being God's special people does not set them into a different category with God. They are just as accountable to God as the Gentiles.

By boasting in something that they refuse to obey and keep, they end up being no different than the Gentiles who boast in their wisdom and yet are fools. Everyone is guilty – Jew and Gentile alike. Three weeks from now we will look at Romans 3, but I just want you to hear this text in light of what we see here in chapter two regarding the Jewish pride in obedience to the Law, being instructors to the Gentiles, and their role as a light for the world to be drawn to God:

*"as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.'"* (Romans 3:10–12, ESV)

Both Gentiles and Jews are guilty before God. And in some respects the Jews are guiltier. Maybe that is why Paul spends so much time on the Jewish issue. They were given the law so that they could honor God and make His name known among the Gentiles. However, their disobedience served to both dishonor God and to hinder Gentiles from coming.

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<sup>4</sup> This phrase is hard to understand at face value. Schreiner suggests that this injunction was targeting the practice of raiding pagan temples and then profiting from the sale of the very idols that they detest.

The second half of verse 24 is a stunning statement since blasphemy was the ultimate sin in the Jewish mind and heart: *“The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you” (Rom. 2:24b).*

Paul is quoting from Isaiah 52, where Israel’s sin had led to them being conquered by a foreign nation, which in turn led the other nations to deride God’s blessing. In the same way, the lack of obedience to God’s law and the hypocrisy that went along with it has led to the Gentiles declaring that God was not real.

Don’t miss the significance of this statement! The very people who claimed to be special to God actually empowered others to blaspheme God’s name. Their special status not only did not spare them from judgment; it created a scenario that violated the very essence of their mission in the world. They thought they were not like “the Gentiles,” when in fact they were arguably worse. John Murray summarizes the issue well:

*“The tragic irony is apparent. The Jews who claimed to be the leaders of the nations for the worship of the true God had become the instruments of provoking the nations to blasphemy.”<sup>5</sup>*

R. Kent Hughes gives a poignant illustration of this:

Stuart Briscoe tells about having to deal with a fellow employee who had embezzled a large sum of money from the bank for which they both worked. The reason that 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. 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 believed as a ‘lot of hogwash,’ and the God he claimed to serve as ‘nonexistent.’<sup>6</sup>

Spiritual hypocrisy has significant consequences.

### **3. True Circumcision**

The final aspect of Jewish spirituality that Paul addresses is circumcision. Paul has already talked about the Law, and it was very important to Jewish spirituality. But circumcision was even more important since it was the mark of God’s covenant with Abraham, the father of the Jewish people (see Genesis 17). A male was not considered part of the covenant community of Israel and was not allowed in public worship without this symbolic act having been completed. Circumcision symbolized a person’s connection to the promise of Abraham, and it was part of the spiritual continuity and heritage of the Jewish people.<sup>7</sup> Romans 4:11 says that Abraham *“received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith . . .”*

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<sup>5</sup> John Murray, *Romans – NICTNT*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1965), 85.

<sup>6</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Romans – Preaching the Word Series*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishing, 1991), 61.

<sup>7</sup> Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987). 218.

More than any other symbol, circumcision was the covenantal mark of the Jewish people and the distinguishing mark between other nations. In the book of Ephesians, Paul even uses the terms “circumcision” and “uncircumcision” instead of “Jew” and “Gentile.” And the early church had to wrestle with whether or not circumcision was a requirement for becoming a Christian (see Acts 15:1-12). The symbol was that important.

In Romans 2:25-29 Paul connects circumcision and the keeping of the Law. In fact he links circumcision with obedience and true spirituality. In the same way that he talked about a law underneath the Old Testament law (Rom 2:12-15), he now talks about true circumcision versus external circumcision.

He states the truth very clearly in verse 25 and illustrates it with a question in verse 26.

*“For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?” (Romans 2:25–26, ESV)*

What emerges here is the clear sense that obedience or true spirituality is what circumcision was really intended for. The mere condition of “being circumcised” means nothing if there is no connection between the symbol and spirituality. Those who break the law miss the point of circumcision, and those who keep the law, despite their uncircumcision, are fulfilling God’s intentions.

This idea of an internal circumcision was not a new concept. The book of Deuteronomy called the people to circumcise their hearts (Deut. 10:16) and the prophet Jeremiah talked about the people’s unwillingness to listen as an issue of having “uncircumcised ears” (Jer. 4:4). Circumcision was never meant to be an external-only issue. But that is what was happening with Jews who were becoming judgmental of Gentiles.

So you can imagine the shock when the Jews read verse 27:

*“Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law.” (Romans 2:27, ESV)*

The reason that Paul talks this way is to emphasize the main point of this text: that outward actions alone avail nothing. It would have been shocking for Jew to hear that an uncircumcised Gentile could be considered “circumcised” without actually being circumcised and that the obedience of those Gentiles could become a means of Jewish condemnation.

The Jews’ failure to understand true circumcision has led, according to Paul, to God’s name being blasphemed among pagan Gentiles and to uncircumcised Gentiles being more righteous than God’s chosen people. In their judgment, the Jews missed what the symbol of circumcision was all about.

### **Three Conclusions**

Paul concludes chapter two with three summary statements regarding true obedience, and these conclusions apply not only to the Jews, but also to us. Romans 2 is written to spiritually-minded people, so we need to listen as well.

## 1) No external-focused living

Verse 28 is a very important reminder that being a part of God's people is not merely about externally focused living. The text tells us that there were Jews who were not really "Jewish" in this sense. While they had the pedigree, heritage, and right religious activities, these things were no guarantee that they were on the right path spiritually.

Is this just a Jewish problem? I think not. It is a human problem, and it reflects what humans tend to do with spirituality. We have this tendency to reduce spirituality to a series of "things" that we do. Do not get me wrong: what we do as a result of the gospel is vitally important. However, we need to recognize and be warned here about this tendency to reduce Christianity to a series of external markers.

Ask someone if he or she is a Christian, and you might hear the following answers:

- I grew up in the church
- I was baptize at age 13
- I walked an aisle and prayed a prayer
- I was raised in a Christian home
- I read my Bible every day
- I tithe on everything that I make

And while all of these are not necessarily bad, if that is the sum total of what it means for us to be a Christian, we are in trouble. For example, if you asked me "Mark, how's your marriage?" Imagine your reaction if I said, "Great, we are still living together." The answer is good, but not good. And that is the point here. True spirituality has to be more than being in the right place, being born into the right family, and doing the right things.

## 2) Heart-based obedience

The second conclusion that Paul addresses here is the positive angle on obedience. In verse 29 he says, *"But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter."* Paul tells us what real spirituality or Christianity is all about. Notice the important words such as *inward*, *heart*, and *Spirit*.

Throughout this book Paul will show us how this is what the gospel is really driving at, namely, that God is looking for obedience that springs from love and desire and passion not compliance, duty, and obligation.

As a parent I have had to make this adjustment, and it has not been easy. When children grow up, parents have to adjust the focus from outward obedience to heart-based obedience. This starts to

happen around the start of the teen years. Some parents respond by making more and more rules. Others throw up their hands and give up. But the key is discovering how to shepherd the heart of a child. Parents have to make the shift from merely being concerned with external obedience to being intentional with reaching the heart of their children. Why? Because heart-based obedience is what really matters, and it is what really lasts. And this is what God desires.

But we have to recognize that in our Christian living, in our parenting, in our counseling, and even in our teaching, our human default is toward non-heart based living. So we have to keep calling ourselves back to this important dynamic of the gospel.

### **3) God-centered passion**

The final conclusion is simple but transforming. Verse 29 says, *"His praise is not from man but from God."* Externally-focused living and externally-focused judgment springs from the wrong focus. Once again we have an "exchange problem." Hypocritical living exchanges the praise of men for the praise of God. Hypocritical living is fine if people think you are godly when you really are not. Hypocritical living is fine with you talking ahead of where you really live.

But people with true spirituality and true obedience have the praise of God and a love for God's glory at the center of their lives. They want to please Him, to honor Him, and to love Him with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength. True obedience is focused on a passion to make God the central focus and the most powerful motivation in a person's life.

So as we close Romans 2, can I just ask you to take careful inventory of your life today? How is it with your soul today? Are you passionate about the right things? Are you in church for the right reasons? Where does God find you today?

If you find yourself in a place where your walk with God has become rote, externally-focused, judgmental, and proud, let me invite you to re-fix your gaze upon Jesus and the centrality of God. Let me invite you to come back to what it really means to be a follower of Jesus: to love the Lord with all your heart.

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