

1-4

ROMANS

GOD'S GOOD NEWS

STUDY #5

2:17-29



OVERVIEW - ROMANS 2:17-29

In 1:18-3:20, Paul shows why the gospel of righteousness (1:16-17) is *necessary* for all humanity. It is necessary because *all* humanity is under God's wrath - both Gentiles (1:18-32) and Jews (2:1-3:8). As with last week, Paul exposes the culpability of Jewish Christians who would have agreed with Paul's denunciation of the Gentile world (1:18-32), but thought that it didn't apply to them. In 2:17-29, Paul makes this point clear by demonstrating that neither one's possession of the Law, nor one's status as an ethnic Jew (by virtue of circumcision) provide adequate refuge before the righteous judgement of a holy God.

The Law (2:17-24)

17-20 Jewish people could rightly boast of the privilege of being chosen by God (Exo 19:5-6). Possessing God's Law, they had the embodiment of knowledge and truth, and were to be a light to the nations in darkness (Isa 60:1-3).

21-24 Yet as great as these privileges were, Paul makes clear that the mere possession of God's Law does not exempt someone from God's wrath. The Law that the Jews proudly possessed (and taught) also testified to their own guilt. Though they might denounce the Gentiles for suppressing God's truth and violating his righteous decree (1:18-32), the Jews were no less guilty of contradicting God's Law which they possessed. Their teaching was valid, but their lives weren't consistent with this teaching.¹ Consider what Jesus says of some of the Jewish teachers in Matthew 23:2-3, "*The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.*"

The added critique given by Paul (v 24) is that the hypocrisy of God's people caused God's name to be disdained among the very Gentiles among whom the Jews were to shine. We see this in Isaiah 52:5 and Ezekiel 36:22, whereby the name of the Lord was reviled among the nations in which God's people were exiled for their disobedience. How tragic it is in our day when the hypocrisy of the church causes us to be scorned by those, whom ironically, we have looked down upon in self-righteousness.

There is another solemn warning for us here also - correct doctrine is no substitute for obedience borne out of genuine faith. Only those who truly belong to God's people will escape God's judgement. As we shall see, it is not those who possess the law, nor those who have been circumcised, who are truly God's people, but only those whose hearts have been circumcised by the Spirit. It is from this heart that a life of obedience flows.

Circumcision (2:25-29)

25-27 Circumcision was a sign of God's covenant promises given to his people through Abraham (Gen 17:11). It physically differentiated the community of people who belonged to God (the Jews) from those who didn't (the Gentiles) and was a pledge of covenant obedience. Yet against those who saw this physical marker as a guarantee of their exemption from God's judgement, Paul reminds them that the sign of circumcision is as only as good as the faith it signifies and the obedience that results. This is why God calls his people through the Old Testament to *circumcise their hearts* (cf. Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16, 30:6; Ezek 44:9; Jer 4:4, 9:26). The outward sign is only as good as the inward spiritual reality. Therefore, Paul indicates that even obedient Gentiles, those circumcised inwardly (cf. 2:15), will condemn those whose circumcision is merely outward (v 27).

28-29 Only those who are circumcised inwardly are the true people of God, and it is this circumcision of the heart which enables the obedient living which will distinguish the righteous from the unrighteous (2:13). Because of Israel's persistent sin, God promised through his Prophets a new covenant whereby he would give his people new hearts and write his law upon their hearts by His Spirit (Jer 31:33 & Ezek 36:25-27). Circumcision of the heart (and not the flesh) is thus the defining mark of God's people under the new covenant. This circumcision of the heart is not brought about by works of the Law (including physical circumcision) but solely by Christ's work on our behalf. Colossians 2:11-12 tells us that in Christ, our self, ruled by the sinful flesh, has been *cut off*. Just as Jesus was *cut off* in judgement at the cross, so too has our guilt been removed. Not only so, but the dominion of sin over our hearts has also been *cut off*, such that we have been made new by the Spirit (Gal 6:15; Rom 7:6), and can live in obedience to God's Law. Paul thus makes clear that neither possession of the Law nor circumcision can save. All are under God's wrath and all need to be circumcised inwardly in order to be rescued from this wrath.

¹ Those *robbing temples* could well refer to those who, in pursuing the idol of greed, refused to pay the Temple tax. Though there is some debate over what this phrase means in the original, the main point is clear - the Jewish people were declared guilty by the very Law they believed and taught. They were hypocrites by God's own standards. See Douglas Moo, Romans (Eerdmans, 2018), 173-4.

GETTING STARTED

1. Have you experienced people rejecting God because of the hypocrisy of those who say they're his people?²

INTO THE TEXT

Read Romans 2:17-24

2. Why might a Jewish person (as described in verses 17-20) have possessed a self-confidence before God?
3. How does Paul strip away this false confidence?
4. How is Bible knowledge both a valuable and yet a dangerous thing to have? How can we grow in Bible knowledge while avoiding the dangers of hypocrisy?³

Read Romans 2:25-29

5. What was the meaning and significance of circumcision for a Jewish person?
6. How does Paul strip away any false sense of confidence before God that circumcision might have given to his Jewish audience?
7. The true people of God are those whose hearts have been circumcised (v 29). What does this mean, and how is this made possible? (*cf.* Col 2:11-12; Ezek 36:25-27)
8. How does this passage help us to understand the relationship between faith and works?

TAKEAWAY

9. Reflect on the ways your life either commends or contradicts God's Word and ways. How can you use your own life to better recommend God?
10. With new hearts, we are a new creation through Christ. Read 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 together and spend time thanking God that us guilty hypocrites have been forgiven and made new in Christ.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

² Question adapted from Timothy Keller, *Romans 1-7 For You* (The Good Book Company, 2014), 64.

³ Question sourced from Christopher Ash, *Teaching Romans 1-8* (Christian Focus, 2014), 116.