

## Studies in Romans

### The Dangers of Externalism (2:25-29)

#### Context

- **1:1-17 Introduction**
  - 1:1-5 Paul's greeting and a summary of the gospel
  - 1:6-15 Paul's relationship with the Romans
  - 1:16-17 Paul's thesis: God's gospel is powerful to save all who believe
- **1:18-4:25 The problem and God's solution**
  - 1:18-3:20 The problem: God's wrath at our unrighteousness
    - 1:18-32 Mankind is facing God's wrath, both now and, ultimately, in the future, because we have all rebelled against Him
    - 2:1-3:20 There are no exceptions and no excuses; even the Jews are sinners who face God's wrath

The key to understanding Paul's argument in **1:18-3:8** are his statements in **3:9** and **3:19**. As if a *prosecuting attorney*, Paul is determined to demonstrate "that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin" (**3:9**). The desired result of his argument is "that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God" (**3:19**).

Paul is now, in **2:1-3:8**, indicting the Jew (as he did the Gentile in **1:18-32**), and again, Paul's point: the Jew needs salvation just as much as anyone else. Your privileges are not what counts before God. We've just learned that it's not the knowledge of the law that counts. All of the privileges that the Jews were fond of boasting about – those things held no saving value before God. The reality is that all have sinned and are deserving of God's wrath, the Jews too. Paul concludes in **v. 24** with a devastating blow. Far from being a light to those in darkness, "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles" because of them.

The danger of ritualism / externalism...

#### Ritual without reality is unrighteousness

*For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. Romans 2:25*

What is circumcision? When did it originate? What was circumcision originally?

See **Joshua 24:2-3; Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3; Genesis 17:1-14.**

It is important to note that **circumcision comes long after Abraham was justified!**

1. **Circumcision sealed justification by faith.** See also **Rom. 4:11.**
2. **Circumcision could be said to be the sign of regeneration.**
3. **Circumcision summons to obedience.**

4. **In the physical descendants of Abraham, circumcision summons the seed of Abraham to follow in his faith and in his obedience.**

How was circumcision misunderstood?

1. For the average Jew circumcision spoke of Jewish nationality. But note **John 7:22**.
2. It was the symbol of being among the people who possessed the law.
3. It was regarded as a seal of every Jew's salvation.
4. Circumcision was regarded, one might say, as a piece of magic.

Now we're in a position to see Paul's point. What's he say there in **v. 25**?

*For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law...*

Its value is that it points to the way of salvation, *which is?*

*...but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.*

So, Jews tended to think that circumcision was in itself a mode of entry into the saved people of God...

*What external things are we tempted to treat similarly?*

## **Reality without ritual is righteousness**

**Verse 26:** *So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?*

A Gentile who keeps the law has the spiritual reality but not the symbol.

*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***

The Gentile Christian is circumcised in heart but not in body. So, he will be in a better position in judgement than the Jew who is circumcised in his body but not in his heart.

Note the word "reckoned." Important word. See **Rom. 4:3**.

## **The inward reality**

### **Being a Jew is not a matter of heritage**

*For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. **Romans 2:28***

So if the real circumcision isn't outward and physical, what is it then?

*Are there any parallels here for us?*

### **It's a matter of the heart**

*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 2:29***

Note here how important context is to understanding this verse... In this context, what is "the letter"?

The difference between “the letter” and “the Spirit”:

1. **The letter, the written law of God, gives information.**
2. **The letter, the written law of God, enlarges “head-knowledge,” and “head-knowledge” tends to make us proud.**
3. **The letter, the written law of God, has a deadening effect. See 2 Corinthians 3:6.**

## For further discussion

- *What would Paul say to people who make claims such as the following, and who think they will escape judgement?*
  - *“I’ll be okay, I’ve never murdered anyone!”*
  - *“I’m a Jew, I’m one of God’s people!”*
  - *“I’ve been baptized. I come from a Christian family. I go to church!”*
- *What would be Paul’s verdict on Gandhi, Hitler, us?*
- *What change is needed to bring someone into the real people of God? (vv. 25-29)*
- *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?*
- *Going back to Paul’s purposes for writing Romans:*
  - *How will the message of **Romans 2** make our church a place of harmony?*
  - *How will it drive us out in humble evangelism?*