

“Genuine” Romans 2:17-29

“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 teach yourself?...” Romans 2:17-21a

Paul, though specifically addressing the Jews in this passage, certainly wouldn't exclude the generally self-proclaimed “moral man”. This passage would apply to anyone who considered himself basically good or religious. The “if” in verse 17 is a first-class conditional “if” in the Greek. This means the statement is assumed to be true. We could just as easily read it this way: “Since you call yourself a Jew”. This clause is followed by 8 statements (each verb in the present tense – the habitual action verb) that are connected to this “if”. *Since* you rely on the law, *since* you boast in God, *since* you know His will, and so on.

- 1) **Rely** on the law: The word “rely” (Gr. *epanapauomai*) means to remain, trust, rest in or lean upon. The Jews were trusting or leaning upon the fact that they were the possessors and stewards of the law. God had given it to them alone.
- 2) **Boast** in God: (Gr. *kauchaomai*) The Jews *bragged* about their covenantal relationship with God as being exclusive.
- 3) Know His will: They were well aware of God's desires and purpose for them.
- 4) **Approve** what is excellent: (Gr. *dokimazō*) This word for “approve” was the word used for the testing of something to prove its authenticity, its genuineness, often by fire. “They have a concern for spiritually superior standards.”¹
- 5) **Instructed** from the law: (Gr. *katēcheō*) This is the word from which we get “catechism”. It means to verbally instruct.
- 6) Guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness; **Instructor** of the **foolish**: “Instructor” (Gr. *paideutēs*) can actually be translated “punisher, disciplinarian, corrector”. The “foolish” (Gr. *aphrōn*) were those ignorant of the law. **Teacher of children**: (Gr. *nēpios*) This was the term used for babes or infants – those who could not feed or take care of themselves.
- 7) Had in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth.
- 8) Teach others

No doubt as the Jews heard all of this, there were not a few resounding “amens!” They had deluded themselves into believing that, as God's chosen, they had a monopoly on God's favor. They rested in their heritage, the possession of the law, and their circumcision. As John MacArthur stated so well, the Jew saw his Jewishness as an indicator of his superiority rather than a revelation of God's goodness and grace. He rested in the possession of the law, rather than the keeping of it.

¹ Walvoord, John F., Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-. V 2, p 446.

“...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.’” Romans 2:21b-24

“It is difficult to know to what Paul was referring in vv. [22–23](#). Since the description does not fit most Jews of Paul’s day it is possible that these sins are used in a spiritual sense similar to how Jesus interpreted the Law in [Matt. 5:20–48](#). George Ladd in *A Theology of the New Testament*, says “Paul must be referring to robbing God of the honor due him, spiritual adultery, and profaning the devotion due God alone by exalting themselves as judge and lord over their fellow creatures.” p. 505.² “Given what we have seen in Romans 1:21 (pagans dishonor God) and Romans 2:23 (Jews dishonor God), we get the message that the essence of evil is dishonoring God. Evil is the feeling and thinking and acting that treats God as less than infinitely valuable and satisfying... The essence of sin is falling short of the glory of God, that is, not treating the glory of God for what it really is – the most valuable reality and the most satisfying treasure in the universe... The dishonor Paul has in mind is that the reputation of God among the nations is contaminated. The nations look at God’s people and think little of their God... They were created (Isaiah 43:7) and chosen for the honor of God – to display His worth and value and beauty and greatness and trustworthiness and all-satisfying excellence. But instead, they lived as if their God were worthless and the world was valuable instead... The result was that God was ridiculed and His reputation was belittled.”³ And so it is with us, as those who claim the name of Christ, when we rely upon our own ways, our own “successes”, our own resources, our own righteousness and when we say we believe and obey, but our actions prove disobedient.

“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 2:25-29

When the rite of circumcision was originally given to Abraham (Genesis 17:9-14), it was a sign of the covenant that God had cut with Abraham and his seed. Like the Lord’s Supper or baptism in the New Covenant, it had no power in and of itself. It was a sign of Abraham’s faith and obedience to God. To be circumcised, yet deny obeisance to the LORD is to dishonor God

² Utley, Robert James Dr. *The Gospel According to Paul: Romans*. Study Guide Commentary Series. Marshall, Texas: Bible Lessons International, 1998. Ro 2:22.

³ Piper, John. *The Effect of Hypocrisy: Dishonoring God – Part 1*. <http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper99/2-7-99.htm>

and His covenant. So Paul makes the point that circumcision is really a heart issue. If an uncircumcised man (a Gentile) obeys the law, God considers him circumcised. “Paul is not exactly saying that uncircumcised Gentiles can keep the Law, but rather that if they do they will be reckoned as circumcised. Moreover, they then could be called to bear witness in judgment against the circumcised who have transgressed the Law. Paul’s argument was devastating! One of the greatest insults in Judaism was to call another Jew ‘an uncircumcised one,’ and this is what Paul had done in no uncertain terms. Circumcision alone does not justify a man. His actions must be consonant with his profession of faith. In applying this to ourselves, all we have to do is substitute for the word “circumcision” any of the following: Church membership—baptism—confirmation—Methodist—Baptist—Presbyterian—and so on. The great mistake of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews when asked about their relationship to God is to cite their religious affiliation as evidence of their relationship. ‘Are you a believer?’ ‘Of course. I’ve been a member of First Church for twenty-five years.’ ‘Are you a believer?’ “I’m a Catholic! Does that answer your question?’ ‘Are you a believer?’ ‘Why yes, I was baptized right here in Christian Church.’ There are as many answers as there are affiliations and rites, but none will convince God—they are all outward circumcisions.”⁴

The scripture is clear that circumcision is an inward matter of the heart. It is the work of the Holy Spirit circumcising our heart to love the Lord (Deuteronomy 30:6). It is His writing the law of God on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33). It allows us to receive our praise from God rather than expecting it from man (Romans 2:29). Through the circumcision of the heart, we are given life in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit (Colossians 2:11-12). We gain these things through the shed blood of Jesus Christ in the New Covenant. “God judges according to “the secrets of the heart” ([Rom. 2:16](#)), so that He is not impressed with mere outward formalities. An obedient Gentile with no circumcision would be more acceptable than a disobedient Jew with circumcision. In fact, a disobedient Jew turns his circumcision into *uncircumcision* in God’s sight, for God looks at the heart. The Jews praised each other for their obedience to the Law, but the important thing is the ‘praise of God’ and not the praise of men ([Rom. 2:29](#)). When you recall that the name ‘Jew’ comes from “Judah” which means “praise,” this statement takes on new meaning ([Gen. 29:35](#); [49:8](#)).”⁵

“Let us be careful – O so watchful and careful – all of us lovers of the Bible. Beware lest we rest in the Word and boast in God and know His will and approve what is excellent and guide the blind and correct the foolish and teach the immature, but do not teach ourselves. Beware lest the Word become a formal thing. An external thing. If it does not break us, if it does not humble us, if it does not lead us to a sweet, childlike trust in free grace – in other words, if it does not lead us to the Gospel of justification by grace, through faith in Christ – then we are not yet taught by the Word of God, and are not fit to teach others. Woe to me and other teachers and preachers – lovers of the Book – who have in the Word of God the embodiment of knowledge and truth, but only know the letter of the Law and not the Spirit – who only know the form of righteousness and not the righteousness that comes by faith.”⁶

⁴ Hughes, R. Kent. *Romans : Righteousness from Heaven*. Preaching the Word. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1991. p 67, p 68.

⁵ Wiersbe, Warren W. *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996. Ro 2:1.

⁶ Piper, John. *The Effect of Hypocrisy: Dishonoring God – Part 2*. www.soundofgrace.com/piper99/2-14-99.htm

