

“WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A JEW.”

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June 11, 2023, 10:30 AM

Scripture Texts: Romans 2:17-29

Introduction.

Paul is still playing the spiritual prosecuting attorney, having prosecuted the Gentiles, is now prosecuting the Jews. Which means he is basically prosecuting the entire human race.

Like a good prosecuting attorney, Paul is moving into closing arguments and so he is sharpening the point of his attack to a forceful conclusion. Paul doesn't deescalate, he escalates. He uses direct address (you, you) and pointed rhetorical questions where the answers are not in doubt.

Vss. 17-20, the heritage of the Jews.

Paul begins by stating what a Jew is by giving a list of their huge advantages and privileges.

They proudly bear the name Jew, the chosen people of God, distinguished from all the other peoples of earth. They have received the law of God, the very wisdom of God from heaven, all they need to know.

They bragged about having the true God as their God, He is their God and they are His people. They had God as their deliverer and savior and protector. The Jews were God's favorite.

They prided themselves for have been given knowledge of God's will, a clear revelation which the Gentiles did not have. They boasted at being able to discern what is good and evil. They were instructed in the truth. They could make superior moral judgments, far above the ignorant Gentiles.

So blessed were the Jews with an abundance of wisdom and learning, they could guide and instruct everyone else. They provided moral guidance to those who are spiritually blind. They were a light to those in darkness.

This is a generous outpouring of benefits. No people on earth were more privileged and blessed. God entrusted the Jews with the greatest treasures.

The Jews had God as their God, Abraham as their father, the law as their standard, and the covenant as their inheritance. No wonder they were a proud people who boasted.

If they were feeling a bit puffed up at this moment, it didn't last long. Paul is about to bring them down. There is a profound disconnect, something is seriously wrong between what they have been given and what they are doing with it.

This is why Paul's rebuke will be all the more shockingly horrific and appalling, what ingratitude in the face of so much grace.

Vss. 21-24, the hypocrisy of the Jews.

What Paul did in chapter 1, listing a host of Gentile sins, he now does with the Jews.

Like a heat seeking missile, Paul asks five penetrating questions meant to humble the Jews. They show the Jews have not lived up to their calling, to their gifting.

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.

And then the damning final statement, the sharpest barb of all, you who accuse others of blaspheming the name of God, cause the name of God to be blasphemed.

The Jews looked down on the Gentiles, they despised them, they were dirty, their sins were disgusting. They were impure, given over to lust and sexual immorality. Yet, the Jews were guilty of something even worse. What sin could be worse?

Hypocrisy. Paul paints a staggering picture of hypocrisy. Are there a people more richly blessed with every heavenly blessing than the Jews?

They knew the law so well they could judge anyone's behavior according to it, but they never bothered to apply that judgment to themselves. This is the definition of hypocrisy. Hearers not doers. Preaching without practicing.

Do you see the contrast, the irony, the hypocrisy? They are correcting and instructing and teaching other, but not correcting themselves. They see everyone else's sin, but not their own.

Paul shows their boasting is a disgrace. How can one so blessed with the knowledge of God and His will, who knows what is true, who has been given so much light be so blind?

They took God's gifts and used them to cover up their sin. They took God's name, God's worship and sacraments, covenant membership, and hide behind it and hide their sin.

They say they have God as their law-giver, but they aren't law-keepers. They don't live up to the truth they know and boast about possessing.

The Jews boasted in the law, how great it was, such a treasure given to them by God. So their breaking of the law is the greatest and highest dishonoring and devaluing of God. Their dishonoring of God is far greater than the dishonoring of the wicked and evil Gentiles.

Do you see the double jeopardy of the Jews? Not only are they guilty of their terrible crimes and sins against God, but they are guilty of causing the Gentiles to blaspheme the name of God.

Oh, how great was their pride, arrogance, presumption in thinking they were good with God.

Vss. 25-29, the heart of the Jews.

This is Paul's finally assault on the Jews, the knockout punch, the heart of the matter.

Paul stripped away any special protection the Jews felt by having the law, now he rips away any special protection they think they have by having the mark of the covenant.

Paul turns to the thing the Jews were proudest of, circumcision. This was their mark, the mark of purity, they were the very people of God. This was the mark that they were safe. The rabbis said a circumcised man would not go to hell.

Circumcision for the Jews was their security blanket, their Fort Knox, their great defense against God's judgment. They had Abraham as their father and they had circumcision as the mark of God's covenant, of being chosen. It was the physical sign of initiation into the people of God.

It was their sinner's prayer, their four spiritual laws, their receiving Jesus into their heart.

The Jews were presumptuous, they were operating under the assumption that they were chosen, they had the covenant, they had the law and the prophets, therefore they were good to go. Their ticket to heaven was already stamped.

The Jews thought circumcision was all they needed for righteousness and salvation. They are the same as those who believe if they are baptized then they will be saved and get in heaven. They think they are justified by putting their trust in the water of baptism alone.

Right away in verse 25 Paul declares circumcision only benefits those who keep the law. If you break the law then you are equivalent to one who was never circumcised, that is a Gentile, someone outside of the covenant.

Then Paul gets even more intense. Paul actually says if the uncircumcised keep the law, he is circumcised.

Paul flips the tables. Instead of the Jews being the one to judge and condemn the Gentiles, the uncircumcised Gentiles who keep the law will judge and condemn the circumcised Jews who don't fulfil the law. In fact, judgment will be worse for them since they had so many superior advantages.

Implications and application.

I wear a sign of a covenant on my finger, a *marriage covenant* made before witnesses with vows. Suppose for the sake of illustration, that in order to go to heaven you had to be married. God gives me this great gift of marriage, this sign of the covenant as my security. I boast in this covenant, how great it is to be married. But I treat my wife horribly, I abuse her, I speak harshly to her, I don't provide for her, I ignore her, neglect her, leave her for long stretches, even cheat on her, and not just a little, but a lot. But I am married, I have my ring, I belong to God, heaven is my inheritance. I am good.

What value is my covenant, my vows? What confidence can I have before God that my wedding ring will be enough? God, see my ring, I am married. Utter hypocrisy. This is the lie Paul exposes.

If Paul were speaking to *American Christians* today what would he say? He would be merciless. He would start by pointing out all our superior advantages. He would point out our nations founding, our Christian heritage and history, the deep influences of the Gospel in our national life, in our government, education, morality, law.

He would point out the freedom of religion, the freedom to assemble and worship. He would point out all the Christian churches and preachers, the Christian book publishers and magazine publications, the Christian music and radio, the Christian schools. Our countless copies and translations of the Bible.

And what about all our wonderful creeds and confessions, our rich history and heritage of orthodox teaching? Who is more blessed?

He would point to our freedom to believe, to know and share the Gospel. The lack of persecution, the great affluence, the countless blessings of God on our national and social life. The freest and most Christian nation in world history.

And what have you done with all these benefits, blessings, freedoms, advantages over most people in most of history. How much have you taken for granted? How much have you casually ignored or neglected? How much have you traded for your own selfish pleasures and pursuits?

You know God, you know the Bible, you have seen the light, so what about all your stealing and robbing of God, withholding what belongs to Him, what about all your lust and fornication; what about all your idolatry, love of things, anything more than God?

What about all your assumptions and presumption, that your baptism, your going to church, your not being too bad, certainly not being as bad as all those non-Christians, that all of this will make you look good to God and win over His favor and acceptance?

To all of this Paul will say:

“No one is a Christian who is merely one outwardly, nor is baptism outward and physical. A Christian is one inwardly, and baptism is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.”

Baptism is only a benefit to those who are covenant keepers, who walk in the will of the Father.

What the Jews failed to understand was that circumcision was never about the physical act, it was about obedience from the heart (Deut. 10:16, 30:6). True Jewishness and true circumcision are not external matters, but internal, matters of the heart. Not all Israel is Israel, not all Jews are Jews, not all Christians are Christians.

Christianity is a heart religion. True religion is not about doing things, it is about loving God. God is never satisfied with us just doing things. “I don’t want your sacrifices, I want your heart.”

The only thing that saves us is a broken and contrite heart. Without humility the heart is not circumcised.

Notice how Paul deals with the proud Jews. God hates pride and He hates hypocrisy, He will judge it, in this life and in the life to come. God resists the proud, if you are proud, God will not protect you. We hate it in others, so why are we so inconsistent and tolerate it in ourselves?

Circumcise your heart with humble confession and repentance. Fear God and cast yourself in total dependence on Jesus by faith. Be a person of a circumcised heart, a heart under the lordship of Jesus.

Being a Christ follower begins with the fear of the Lord. The sword Paul uses to cut to the heart of the religious Jews is double-edged. It is meant to cut to our heart as well. If your heart has not been cut by the Word, if your heart has not been pierced by the Word then you may be in trouble. God’s Word is a surgical scalpel.

“Those who dare to set up their own merits against the righteousness of God, glory more in outward observances than in real goodness; for no one, who is seriously touched and moved by the fear of God, will ever dare to raise up his eyes to heaven, since the more he strives after true righteousness, the clearer he sees how far he is from it” (John Calvin).

Hebrews 4:12-13 The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the

thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Do we want that? Do we welcome that? Do we ask God to do that?

Do we want to come under the truth of God's Word?

Do we want Him to surgically remove our cancerous sin and heal our diseases?

Beware of your sin, beware of carelessly thinking your little sins won't grow into bigger sins. Beware of being afraid to examine your hearts and do any kind of serious contemplation of your souls. Beware of keeping the Bible an external thing, something we know but that's all.

We want our knowledge of the truth to be enough to get us into heaven, without having to actually live by the truth and according to the truth. Head knowledge without heart change is worthless.

God's Word is not just a painting to look at, it is a window into God's heart and ours. It is God talking to us, trying to say something very important to us.

Every one of us is a hypocrite. None of us practices all we preach, none of us does all we believe. We have all fallen short, we have all dishonored God, we have all trusted what we do rather than what God has done. We are all under the power of sin and are guilty before God.

When your words and actions don't reflect a genuine love for Jesus, confess it and cast yourself on His mercy. Say, "Lord, I am chief among sinners. I have put up a false front, I have deceived myself and others and I have tried to deceive you. I have been inconsistent and compromising. Give me a new and right spirit. Don't take your Holy Spirit from me but by your Spirit search me, convict me and cleanse me and enable me to walk in your ways according to your will for your glory."

Our only hope is the hope the proud Jewish Pharisee Paul discovered.

I Timothy 1:15 Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. **16** But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. **17** To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Prayer: "Oh, Lord, please sustain me with your grace. Uphold me in my faith. Don't let me wander from the path of righteousness. Keep me committed to you. May the life that people see of me externally be consistent with what is true of me internally. Let not my life or my name or that of First Church become a reproach to the gospel."