

**Romans 2:17—29 Condemnation of the self-righteous Jew**

This section continues in condemning mankind by turning to the Jew. So far Paul has shown that the unrighteous and ungodly person stands condemned. He then turns to the self-proclaimed righteous person and shows they are just as condemned by God. He finally addresses the Jewish person who says he is righteous because God gave them all the privileges of being Jewish. Since God has lifted the Jewish nation out of the world and set her up as the nation who is to be the light of the world, they feel safe in whom they are. The Jew felt save from condemnation because they were sons of Abraham (John 8:33); they had the Mosaic Law and because of circumcision. They felt certain God wouldn't condemn the Jew. As we will see they are just as condemned in God's eyes as the ungodly person.

**Verses 17—20**

Paul is speaking directly to the Jew, specifically to the Jew who relies on their ability to follow the Mosaic Law for their righteousness. These Jews would boast in their relationship with God and in their knowledge of the Mosaic Law for from that they would know and understand what God's will is. Of course, there is nothing wrong in boasting in God if it is done in the right way for the right reason. If done to elevate yourself then the boasting is for naught. Boasting in the Lord is done with the realization that we don't accomplish things for the Lord without His enabling us to do so. Without God, we are nothing and therefore have nothing to boast about.

**1 Corinthians 1:31** ...Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.

**2 Corinthians 10:17** But he who boasts is to boast in the Lord.

**2 Corinthians 3:5** Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God,

These Jews were obviously boasting that God favored them and were therefore special. They lost sight of the fact that God chose them only out of love even though they were nothing.

**Deuteronomy 7:7—8** <sup>7</sup>"The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, <sup>8</sup>but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

**“Approve the things that are essential”**

This phrase can literally mean: “Test those things that differ”. The self-righteous Jew who relied upon the Law would test everything against the Law. If it held up to what the Law said, it would be approved. This type of Jew did not do this from the heart and would often be hypocritical in their application of the Law. They would be proud in their knowledge of the Law and in being able to apply details of the Law to every area of other people's lives but not their own. They were doing righteous acts but the heart was still evil. The external was all for show and did not reflect the inner man.

The word “confident” is in the perfect tense meaning they were confident and are continuing to be confident in themselves. Instead of trusting in Jesus Christ, they put their trust in themselves. As some put it today: “I believe in myself.” They put themselves above others seeing themselves as guides, lights, correctors and teachers. They viewed others as blind, in darkness, stupid and immature. In themselves they thought resided the embodiment of knowledge and truth. Another word for embodiment is form. They had the form of godliness but no substance. All of this because they think they understand the finer points of the Law so much better than anyone else. They believed that through the Law came light but in reality it only produced death.

**2 Corinthians 3:6—7** <sup>6</sup>who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. <sup>7</sup>But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones,

came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was,

### **Verses 21—24**

Paul understood the self-righteous Jew because he was one before his conversion. With that understanding came his method for pointing out how their actions are viewed by God. Instead of hitting them with accusations, he asked some softer but pointed questions that would lead them to see who they really were on the inside. These questions were designed to show that the Jews who thought they were keeping the Law were actually violating it. These questions were designed to help them to look inwardly instead at everyone else around them and help the self-righteous Jew understand that he is a sinner in need of a Savior.

The questions:

Do you teach yourself?

Do you steal?

Do you commit adultery?

Do you hate idols?

Do you rob temples?

All are to be answered yes. They who know the Law did not do the Law but were more than willing to tell others what they should do to keep the Law. Through this they dishonored God to the point of blaspheming the name of God. Even the Gentiles knew what these Jews were doing.

### **Verses 25—27**

The last section deals with how these self-righteous Jews were abusing the Law. This section now turns to the rite of circumcision. The self-righteous Jew was proud of his circumcision and rested in it as a righteous act. The first part of this section compares Jew with Gentile with Paul making the case that the uncircumcised Gentile can be more righteous than the circumcised Jew.

Remember, Paul is speaking here only to Jews. Paul knew exactly how they thought about the Law and circumcision because he was in that very place, earning his righteousness through the works of the Law. The only way circumcision could be of any value would be in the keeping of the Law. Those who were circumcised but disobedient to the Law annulled their circumcision. It was as if they had never been circumcised.

On the other hand, the person who was not circumcised but kept all the elements of the Law would be considered to be circumcised and therefore better than the person who was circumcised but not keeping the Law. This became an issue with the Jewish people because circumcision was given before the Law to Abraham and therefore considered more important than the Law. However, living a righteous life was more important than the one-time act of circumcision. Even beyond this, God wanted obedience from the heart.

The uncircumcised person who does keep the Law ends up casting judgment just by the contrast of actions. A person who is holy and righteous compared to a person who is not makes the unrighteous person look worse.

It may help, by rewriting this passage using marriage as the Law and the wedding ring as circumcision, to get a grasp on what Paul is saying.

The wedding ring is of value if you practice fidelity in your marriage; but if you are committing adultery, your wedding ring means nothing. So if the man not wearing a wedding ring keeps faithful to his wife, will not his lack of ring be

regarded as wearing a ring? And he who is not wearing a ring by keeping faithful in his marriage, will he not judge you who is always wearing a wedding ring but unfaithful to his wife?

I believe verses 25—27 are hypothetical in nature. Notice the word “if” in verse 26. No man can keep the Law to the level that God expects. Everyone breaks or transgresses the Law and therefore he would be viewed as uncircumcised. Paul is merely saying that these Jews were placing much more importance on circumcision than they should. Paul pulls the rug out from under those putting their trust in circumcision saying that even a Gentile can be considered circumcised through doing the Law. The lowest form of human being could be elevated above the so-called righteous Jew. There was no innate value in being circumcised.

One problem with this idea of the Gentiles keeping the Law is that contained in the Law is the commandment of circumcision. How could they stay fully comply to the Law yet not get circumcised? I believe the answer lies in verse 26. The NASB translates this passage as “So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the law...” The Greek word for requirements is δικαιομματα and is translated “righteous” in 5:18. Romans 2:26 would then read: “So if the uncircumcised man keeps the righteous acts of the law...”. This would then refer to the moral portion of the Law and not the civil or religious portion of Law. Even though the Mosaic Law is never split up into parts, Paul hypothetically says that if a Gentile were to completely obey the moral portion of the Law then he would be considered circumcised.

### Verses 28—29

Paul continues by describing who a true Jew is. It must be understood that Paul here is comparing two Jews not a Jew and Gentile. There are many who go wayward in their theology by applying this passage to a comparison of Jew and Gentile. This is the first step in equating Israel spiritually with the Church the Body of Christ. This then leads to even greater error and confusion. Israel is not the Church and the Church is not Israel. We as a member of the Church, the Body of Christ do have the spiritual blessings of the New Covenant given to us by God’s grace but none of the physical blessings.

**Romans 15:27** Yes, they were pleased to do so, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things.

From the Old Testament and into the Gospels God was dealing with both believing and unbelieving Jews. Even in the end times will there be only a remnant of believing Jews. We can see this distinction in the days of Elijah where he thought he was the only believing Jew left. God, however, had His remnant of 7,000 (1 King 19:18). We also see the faithful few in the little flock of Luke 12:32. Most of Israel had rejected their Messiah and only a few accepted. They were promised the Kingdom. Many parables were designed to show the differences between believing and unbelieving Israel. For instance, the wise and foolish builders, the wheat and the tares, the sower and the soils, the two sons, etc. are all parable that show the two groups within Israel. Paul also distinguishes between the two classes of Jews in Romans 9:6 and sites Isaiah 10:22 in Romans 9:27 concerning the split between believing and unbelieving Israel.

With this background and with the understanding that the Bible refers to the two groups of Israelites it will be easier to see what verses 28 and 29 are saying.

After Paul made it clear that there was nothing magical about becoming circumcised he continues the argument stating that circumcision is not what make a Jew a Jew. The true Jew is one who is made a Jew in his heart by the Spirit. It is not the Law that does it nor the physical act of circumcision but can come only from God. Those who put their faith in God are the ones who will, by the Spirit, be circumcised.

This could not have been said before God raised up Paul to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. It was only after Israel was put aside and God began dealing with individuals in the newly formed Church, which is His Body that the Law was starting to fade away. Approximately nine years before Romans was written Paul said in Pisidia-Antioch on his first missionary journey:

**Acts 13:39** and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses.

The Idea of being a Jew without the Law was difficult for Israel to understand. They had been practicing the Law for almost 1500 years and now were being told that their righteousness was not through the Law but through the Spirit.

Remember, these were Jews who were not Kingdom believers. They were either Body believers who happened to be saved or unsaved Jews who needed a Savior. This is important because the Kingdom Jewish believers were still (properly) practicing the Law (Acts 21:20). Those saved after Paul did not become Kingdom believers but Body believers who were never told to follow the Law.

All this was happening during the time of transition from Kingdom to Grace. When Romans was written it corresponds to the events recorded before Acts 21. The Jews had fallen and the possibility of entering the Millennial Kingdom at this time was removed. They were now in the process of being completely cut off which would be complete by 70 A.D.

**Romans 11:12** <sup>12</sup>Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure (diminishing) is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be! <sup>15</sup>For if their rejection (for entering the Kingdom) is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

During this time of transition, There are two things happening. Israel is on a downward slide until God is completely finished with her (temporarily) and the Church, the Body of Christ is in the process of growing to full maturity with portions of the Mystery still to be revealed through Paul. By not distinguishing or discerning this change in God's plan you will only be completely confused.

To distinguish between these two programs was critical at this time because there were still Kingdom believers in Jerusalem at this time who were under the Law and correctly obeying the Law (Acts 21:20). They would soon be told to put the Law aside because there is a new a better way that they are to follow wrapped up in the person of Jesus Christ (see Hebrews). In the mean time the Church at Rome was made up of Gentiles and Jews who were "Body Believers". They were saved after Paul was saved and were all one in Christ with no distinction of Jew or Gentile. It was to this group Paul was writing. This church was not formed from Jews leaving the Pentecost experience in Acts 2 to form a new "Christian" church but was formed from doctrine received from Paul who received it from Jesus Christ directly.

What we have as members of the Body of Christ is all internal. We are considered to be circumcised by the Spirit. It does not matter what is done externally by man but internally by God. This is the concept that these Jews needed to get their arms around. This new Body of believers with no distinction of Jew or Gentiles was a hard one to comprehend. After years of being told they were superior to the Gentiles and then having to accept that all were equal was very difficult to understand.

**Colossians 2:11** and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ;

**Philippians 3:3** for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh,

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