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Jews and the Law

Romans 2:17—3:20

a Jewish Externalism (2:17-29)

A person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God.

—Romans 2:29

In this section of Romans, Paul communicated convincingly to his self-righteous Jewish brothers and sisters because he was speaking from personal experience. He had once been in their shoes. Not only had he encountered many self-righteous Jews during his three missionary tours, but also he himself had once been one of them. He knew what was in their minds because he had for years been a law-keeping, self-justified Jew.

Paul knew by experience that there were a number of distinctives that gave the Jews a sense of superiority over Gentiles. The Jews felt superior because they relied on the law, knew God's will, approved of what is superior (based on knowl-

edge of the law), guided "the blind," led those who were "in the dark," and instructed "the foolish" (vss. 17-20). "The blind," "the foolish," and "little children" were all common terms that the Jews used for Gentiles—in addition to "dogs" and "swine." Paul described each of these distinctives with a present tense verb, indicating the habitual, ongoing nature of the Jews' sense of superiority. The Jews thought that because they had a national covenant relationship with God (see Gen. 12:1-3), and because they were the recipients of the law, God had elevated them to a privileged position that was above all others.

Actually, back in Paul's day, many of the Jews had a tendency to elevate the law in a way God never intended. They focused so much on the externals of obedience to the law that a personal relationship with God was left out of the picture.

As Christians we, too, can sometimes get so caught up in the externals of our faith—church attendance, ministry duties, and the like—that we get distracted from our highest priority, that of maintaining a personal and vibrant relationship with Jesus Christ. First

things first.

As Paul went through this list of factors pertaining to the Jew's sense of superiority, his Jewish readers may have been nodding their heads in full agreement ("Preach it, brother!"). But Paul proceeded forcefully to set them straight. In these early verses, Paul was setting the stage for his main point: unrepentant Jews are just as guilty before God as unrepentant Gentiles.

He did this by showing how the assets of the Jews had become liabilities because of their hypocrisy. Though the Jews made great professions and boasted of their high standing with God, there was little correspondence between their profession and their practice, between their claims and their conduct. They went through the externals of their religion, but there was little inward righteousness. (Keep in mind that Paul was speaking from personal experience. The apostle had a right

to say these things to his fellow Jews only because he recognized and repented of his own inward inability in the face of sin when he came to Christ).

Ask Yourself . . . *Is my life free from hypocrisy?*

Paul was a Pharisee. The Pharisees usually wore a tasseled prayer shawl called a tallith. Attached by leather strips to a Pharisee's forehead was a small case called a phylactery, which contained passages from Exodus and Deuteronomy.



PAUL THE JEW

Paul's knowledge of common Jewish attitudes described in Romans 2:17-29 came from personal experience. Paul called himself one of the "Hebrews," one of the "Israelites," and one of "Abraham's descendants" (II Cor. 11:22). He was "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee" (Phil. 3:5). Paul excelled at keeping the law.

Paul was well educated as a Jew. He declared, "Under Gamaliel [I] was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors" (Acts 22:3). Gamaliel was considered the top Jewish rabbi of the day.

Following his conversion to Christianity, Paul's background as a Jew put him in a unique position to be able to explain how Jesus and Christianity fulfilled the Hebrew Scriptures.

Paul strategically asked a series of questions with the intent of compelling the Jews to recognize their own hypocrisy (Rom. 2:21-24). These questions related to stealing, committing adultery, robbing temples, and breaking the law. Though Jews taught other people not to engage in such acts, they themselves were doing them, perhaps in more subtle ways. Stealing may have taken the form of dishonest business practices; their adultery may have been literal, or a matter of the heart. Though they hated idols, they would rob Gentile shrines to make a profit, perhaps by selling the idols they stole. In all of this, they dishonored God by breaking the law.

In asking such confrontational questions, Paul was using a common style of communication in ancient times called the diatribe. The questions were not meant to attack, but rather to teach and to exhort. In the present case, Paul engineered his use of the diatribe to help the Jews see their hypocrisy and then repent.

Paul met the Jews on their own ground. His condemnation of their hypocrisy was based on their own Scriptures (the Old Testament). Paul quoted from Isaiah 52:5: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you” (Rom. 2:24). Their hypocrisy was so plain that even the enemies of God could recognize it.

In the ancient world, a name was not a mere label as it is today. A name was considered as equivalent to whomever or whatever bore it. Knowing a person’s name amounted

to knowing that person’s essence or being. In view of this, it is clear that God’s name points to all that God is. To blaspheme God’s name is to blaspheme who He is.

Now, because the Jews—God’s chosen people—had not honored God, the Gentiles supposed that there was really no reason why they should honor Him. Hence, the Gentiles “blasphemed” God because of Jewish unfaithfulness.

Christians can learn a good lesson here. When we publicly profess our faith, the world has us under a microscope. When we disobey God, the world is watching. We must remain alert to the fact that people often make their decisions about Christ by what they see in our lives.

Ask Yourself . . . *What would a non-Christian learn about Jesus by observing me?*

Paul illustrated his point with the rite of circumcision (vss. 25-27). Circumcision was a sign of the covenant God had made with Israel (see Lev. 12:3). Among the Jews, circumcision came to be considered a guarantee of God’s favor and blessing. The Jews tended to think that only the circumcised would have a place in the life to come.

Against this backdrop, Paul pointed out that when the Jews broke the law, they became as though they had not been circumcised (Rom. 2:25). The Greek of this verse is much more forceful than our English translations would suggest. It virtually says, “If you are a lawbreaker, your circumcision has

become nothing more than a fore-skin.” Paul’s point, of course, was that in disobeying the law the Jew had become just like a Gentile law-breaker. It was as if the Jew had the sign of the covenant for no reason.

Paul said the opposite is also true (vs. 26). When the Gentiles kept the law, it was as if they were circumcised (that is, members of God’s covenant people). Gentiles became like circumcised Jews in that they obeyed God’s law that He had written upon their hearts—something the circumcised Jews had been called to do, but in reality had constantly failed to do.

Continuing this line of argumentation, Paul said that the Gentiles who were not physically circumcised—if they obeyed the law—brought condemnation upon the Jews (vs. 27). Paul’s line of reasoning seems to be that if the Gentile should excel the Jew in personal righteousness, condemnation is brought upon the Jew because the Jew actually has the higher standard (the written law).

Paul then drove home his main point: it’s not the external rite that matters, but rather the inner transformation of the human heart (vss. 28, 29a). Being a “Jew,” in Paul’s thinking, was not so much a matter of being physically circumcised, but was rather a matter of having a circumcised heart (see Deut. 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 9:25, 26).

Paul’s thought was that having a circumcised heart—a heart characterized by righteousness and commitment to God—fulfilled the

spirit of the law. Many of the Jews went through the motions of being circumcised and rendered external obedience to the tenets of their religion, but their hearts were not right with God (see Isa. 29:13). A heart that is “circumcised” is one that is holy—that is, a heart recoiling from wrong and dedicated to serving God.

Paul closed his argument by saying that such a person’s praise is not from people but from God (Rom. 2:29b). The Jews typically went through the externals of obeying the tenets of their religion, and they did their (apparently) righteous acts before others to receive their praise. But a true Jew—one with a circumcised heart—is praised by God. The praise of people is fleeting, the affirmation of God lasts for eternity.

Ask Yourself . . . *Whose praise means the most to me? What do I do to attain it?*

b Anticipated Objections (3:1-8)

What advantage . . . is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? —Romans 3:1

After Paul made his points in Romans 2:17-29—in which he deflated the inconsistent Jews—the questions that naturally come to mind are “What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew? And what value is

there in circumcision?" (vs. 1). Paul answered both questions, "Much in every way!" (vs. 2).

For one thing, Paul said, the Jews had been entrusted with the Word of God. This indeed was a great privilege. But with privilege comes responsibility. And many Jews were not faithful in their responsibility. Indeed, they failed to live up to God's standards.

The fact that the Jews were the recipients of God's Word raised the important issue of faith in God's Word (vs. 3). More specifically, Paul addressed the issue as to whether the lack of faith on the part of the Jews nullified God's faithfulness. Paul immediately answered, "Not at all!" (vs. 4a). God is always portrayed in Scripture as being utterly faithful to His Word (see Deut. 7:9; I Cor. 1:9; Heb. 10:23). Paul expanded upon this theme of God's faithfulness in the face of Israel's unfaithfulness in Romans 9 through 11.

Paul made a puzzling statement when he said, "Let God be true, and every human being a liar" (Rom. 3:4b). The context makes the apostle's meaning clear. He was emphasizing God's faithfulness in the face of the Jews' unfaithfulness. Paul's thought seems to have been, "Let God keep on being true (faithful) even though human beings continue to be liars (are unfaithful)." In light of God's spotless integrity, all people do appear as liars.

In support of his argument, Paul quoted from Psalm 51:4; "So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge"

GOD'S UNSWERVING FAITHFULNESS

Paul made it clear that God would remain faithful to His covenants, even though His people drifted from their commitment to Him. The Bible has much to say about God's faithfulness.

- Faithfulness is one of God's divine attributes (Deut. 7:9; 32:4).
- God is a covenant-making God, and He will always be faithful to His covenants with people (Gen. 6:18; 9:9-17; Exod. 2:24; II Sam. 7:11b-16).
- God is a promise-making God, and He will always remain faithful to His promises (I Kings 8:56).
- God's faithfulness endures through all generations (Ps. 100:5).
- God remains faithful even when human beings are woefully unfaithful to Him (II Tim. 2:13).

(Rom. 3:4c). God's judgment against sin displays His faithfulness to His righteous character. God's faithfulness means He will never ignore sin, and when He judges, His judgment is perfect.

God's faithfulness is both comforting and challenging for us as Christians. It is a comfort to know that God will always fulfill the promises He has made. It is a challenge in that we can count on God's discipline when we sin.

Ask Yourself . . . *How has God disciplined me recently?*

Paul anticipated another possible objection to his argument. If the unrighteousness of the Jews accentuated God's righteousness, does that mean God's judgment against the Jews was unjust in some way (vs. 5)? After all, doesn't the glory of God's grace shine all the more brightly because of human sin?

Paul immediately answered, "Certainly not!" (vs. 6). If God was unjust in judging the unfaithful Jews, then God would have to abandon judgment of all people. Since He has "benefited" from people's sins, there would be a perceived conflict of interest. He would not be a fit judge. (This is what Paul described as "a human argument").

The presence of evil in the world is the result of human disobedience. God's glory doesn't need a backdrop, especially the backdrop of human sin. There is no conflict of interest. God is perfectly just in judging the whole world—first the Jews, then the Gentiles.

Paul next addressed the question of how God can justly condemn a sinner when that sinner's lack of integrity enhances God's faithfulness (vs. 7). Put another way, since sin apparently benefited God, how can the sinner be judged for the sin? "God ought to be grateful for the sinner's service," or so the human argument seems to go.

Paul brought up this issue because some of his opponents came to the unwarranted conclusion that

the apostle was advancing the idea that people should do evil so that good would result. Paul didn't even bother to respond to this ridiculous accusation. He considered it sufficient to note that the condemnation of these individuals was well deserved (vs. 8).

C **None Righteous (3:9-20)**

What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin.

—Romans 3:9

Paul emphasized that all people—Jews and Gentiles—are guilty and condemned before God. In fact, in verses 9 through 12 alone, Paul emphasized the universality of humanity's sin nine times. Paul did not want his readers to miss his point. Paul asked if the Jews were any better off than the Gentiles (vs. 9). He immediately answered, "Not at all!" (or "Not by any means!"). The Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin and deserve to be expelled from the presence of God.

To prove his point, Paul quoted or paraphrased Old Testament passages that proved his charge (Rom. 3:10-18; see Ps. 5:9; 10:7; 14:1-3; 36:1; 53:1-3; 140:3; Isa. 59:7, 8). Threading these verses together—like pearls on

a string—was a common mode of argumentation in ancient times. By such argumentation, Paul demonstrated that no one is righteous.

From these Old Testament passages Paul argued that no one is righteous (Rom. 3:10); no one understands or seeks God (vs. 11); all have turned away (vs. 12a); no one does good (vs. 12b); they are deceitful (vs. 13); their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness (vs. 14); they are quick to shed blood (vs. 15); ruin and misery mark their ways (vs. 16); they do not know the way of peace (vs. 17); and they have no fear of God (vs. 18). These characteristics can be seen, in varying degrees,

in every single human being who has ever lived—even in people we might consider “nice.” Before coming to Christ, we were rightly called “enemies” of God (see Col. 1:21).

Notice in these verses that Paul mentioned specific parts of the human body. He did this to point to the totality of sin’s infection in the human being—including the throat, tongue, and lips (Rom. 3:13), the mouth (vs. 14), the feet (vs. 15), and the eyes (vs. 18). The whole person is infected; no part of human nature remains untainted by sin.

By using such imagery, Paul set forth what some theologians have called “total depravity.” This does

The Use of the Old Testament in Romans

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul quoted, alluded to, or paraphrased numerous Old Testament passages. This is quite typical of how the rest of the New Testament uses the Old Testament. Sometimes a New Testament writer gave the general sense of the Old Testament passage without intending to quote it. Other times a New Testament writer combined two or more Old Testament passages together. Still other times the New Testament writer directly quoted from the Old Testament.

Of course, all of this was done under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (II Tim. 3:16). God supernaturally directed the entire process (II Pet. 1:21).

not mean that every single human being is as bad as they can possibly be. Rather it means that every aspect of the human being has been infected by sin. This is as true of the Jew as it is of the Gentile.

Paul's point in verse 18 is particularly important. The failure of the Jews and the Gentiles to fear God was a particularly serious offense, because the fear of God (that is, reverence for God) is the mark of a godly person (see Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 9:10; Eccl. 12:13). If anyone feared God, it should have been the Jews. But they didn't. Their lives were characterized by arrogance and folly.

Arrogance and folly can easily slip into the life of believers if we lose focus on who we are in Christ. If we've lost that sense of wonder over the depth of God's grace for us in spite of our sin, then it probably is a good time for self-examination (see Ps. 139:23, 24)

Ask Yourself . . . *What has the Lord delivered me from?*

Paul next affirmed that the pronouncements of the law are for all those who are "under the law" (Rom. 3:19a). His readers were

under the law in the sense that they were obligated to obey and heed it. They were accountable to the law because of their accountability to God Himself.

The purpose of the law was to silence every mouth and hold the whole world accountable to God (vs. 19b). The law effectively and inarguably points to God's righteous and holy standards, and points to our utter inability to measure up to it. No one is in a position to argue sin away or make excuses, for the law invalidates all rationalizations.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I tend to make excuses for my spiritual failures?*

Paul closed this section of the letter by pointing out that the law was never provided as a means of attaining righteousness or of being pronounced righteous before God (vs. 20; see Acts 13:39; Gal. 2:16; 3:11). Rather, the law was given to make people aware of their sin. It is through the law that human beings become conscious of sin and see their need for a solution to the problem. In this light, the law is an instrument of condemnation, not justification. The law, written on the hearts of all, shines the spotlight on our desperate need for a Savior.