

ROAMING THROUGH ROMANS

“God Wants Righteousness, Not Rites and Rituals”

Romans 2:17-29

Open your Bibles to Romans chapter two. We are going to finish the chapter this session. Let's read our text and then study it line upon line, precept upon precept. Romans 2, beginning at verse 17, Paul writes:

¹⁷Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, ¹⁸and know *His* will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, ¹⁹and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, ²⁰an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law. ²¹You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? ²²You who say, “Do not commit adultery,” do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? ²⁴For “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,” as it is written.

²⁵For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. ²⁶Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? ²⁷And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you who, *even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law?* ²⁸For he is not a Jew who is *one* outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; ²⁹but *he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.*

Paul is continuing to build his case to prove that God is right to bring His wrath against humanity. The Lord has done everything that is necessary to reconcile man's fallen relationship with Him. But at every turn, He has been rejected.

He revealed Himself in creation. Man credited evolution.

He placed the knowledge of Himself in man's heart. Man worshipped anything and everything but Him.

He even sent His Son Jesus to redeem the world. But man rejected Jesus, nailed Him to a cross, and let Him die.

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Little did they know He would rise again on the third day and then ascend into heaven providing us eternal life. But man struggles with the miraculous and does not believe this.

So, yes, there is “Rightness in God’s Wrath.”

Thus, Paul has built his case, destroying every argument man has against the righteousness of God.

In chapter one he indicted the heathen who, although he had the witness of creation, still rejected the Creator. Because of this, he worshipped all kinds of abominable things. This led to a darkened heart, which caused man to desire all kinds of foolish things. So God gave them over to their lusts, and the result is the lawless and wicked world we live in. But it isn’t just the heathen that is without excuse.

God holds all of mankind accountable. As we will find out in chapter 3, *there is none righteous, no, not one.*

And this is especially true for the self-righteous. Many believe that just because they aren’t as bad as their fellow man, they are okay with God. But this is not true. As we learned last time, it is not what we do or do not do that makes us right with God.

It is all about what He has done.

God judges the “secrets of men” through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You can either come before God with your own good works, or rely on what Jesus did on the cross. And, in reality, this kind of self-righteous thinking makes it more difficult to come to the Lord.

Think about the cults such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons. They live upstanding lives, keeping the letter of the law they command in their “holy” books. But they are just walking dead people. And all their good works will go up in flames at the Great White Throne Judgment. That is where we are going to head in this lesson.

Having put aside the arguments of the heathen and the self-righteous, Paul is now going to face the religious — especially the religious leaders. Many of these “holy men” of religions are like the Nicolaitans of Paul’s time. They desire to rule over the people by keeping them under the law. And that is my background, having grown up in the Catholic faith.

Like all good Catholics, I did what I was told by the priests and nuns. I was taught that there is a God. I even believed that Jesus was the Son of God. I knew that He died on a cross and rose again on the third day. I was baptized as an infant. I went to confession many times. I performed my first holy communion. I was even an altar boy until I got

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kicked out (that is a story for another time). I was confirmed and went to Catholic schools and attended mass almost every week.

But, there was no power in all these things I did or what I believed. The truth is, I was on the broad path that leads to destruction. And the moment I went from Catholic to parochial schools, I walked away — as fast as I could.

You see, I had a little religion, but no relationship. I knew about the God of creation, but not the God of salvation. And this is the case for so many in the world. In fact, I think it is one of Satan's great successes.

He gets people to think they are headed in the right direction when, all along, they are right at the edge of the cliff. He deceives them into believing they are headed to heaven when they are on the highway to H.E. double hockey sticks. And there is no group of people more susceptible to this deception than the religious Jews.

If ever there was a people born into privilege in a religious sense, it was and is the Jews. If it were possible to get saved based on birth rights and rituals, they would have a drastic advantage. As we shall see, the Jews were chosen by God to be His people. The Bible even calls them the “apple” of His eye. But Paul is going to argue that all of this privilege is useless.

Even the Jew must be justified by God though faith by believing in Jesus Christ. Look how he begins his argument (verse 17):

Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God,

These are the things the Jews trusted in to get them to heaven:

First, they are “**called a Jew.**” The Jews have a proud heritage. But they let it get to their head. They assumed that because they were Jewish, they were exempt from God's judgment. Remember how, in our study of Ezekiel, we saw that the religious leaders didn't think God would judge Jerusalem.

Why?

Because it was His city and His Temple. God would “never” destroy all of that and especially not if *THEY* were there. You see, Jewish tradition said that Abraham sat at the gates of hell to keep all Jews out (from Calvary Chapel Pastor Sandy Adams). If that was true, I would trust in my 1/2006th Jewish heritage and go out and live however I like. But it is not true.

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Second, the Jews “**rest on the law.**” This means that they believed their possession of the law gave them spiritual rest and salvation. But that is not true either.

As we shall see, the law does not bring salvation. It is designed to help you understand your need for a Savior. The only way to have eternal life is to rest in Jesus. We will talk a lot about entering into God’s rest later in the Book of Romans.

And third, the Jews made their “**boast in God.**” The Jews loved to boast in their special relationship with God. The religious Jew could recite from history all the things He had done for Israel. Of course, they didn’t want to talk about the times that He judged them. It is true that they were chosen by God. But He didn’t choose them because they were the best and brightest. This is why He chose them (Deuteronomy 7:6-8):

“The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; ⁸but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

The Jews were the least, but also the loved.

But there is more. Look what else the Jews rely on instead of the Lord (verse 18):

¹⁸and know *His* will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law,

How do you think the Jews knew God’s will?

They had “Special Revelation” from Him. They had the Hebrew Bible.

That is how they could approve the “**things that are excellent.**” In other words, they knew the things to do and not to do, to love and to hate. And they knew this because God told them these things in the law (the Torah). They had a great advantage over the Gentiles in this department.

Unfortunately, for many this was just rote memorization. The word “**instructed**” means to “teach by repetition.” We get our word *catechism* from it.

And I know about that as well from my Catholic years. After I left the Catholic school, I had to go to catechism every week. This was a class set up for kids who didn’t go to the Catholic schools. And that is exactly what they did there — drill Bible stories into our gourds. But it never penetrated the heart.

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And had not Matt Thomas prayed for me and shared Jesus with me, I would have missed heaven by 18 inches. Like the Jews, the words I learned never went the 18 inches from my head to my heart.

Special revelation belonged to the Jews, but look what they did with it (verses 19-20):

¹⁹and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, ²⁰an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law.

Think about it this way:

The heathen has only conscience and creation to witness to them. The Jews had the Word of God.

In a very real sense, they had superior knowledge. They were on top of the religious pile. So they should have known the “**truth in the law.**”

God wanted them to teach the truth to His people — and, by default, to the Gentiles. But instead, they got caught up in their religion and forgot about the relationship.

And none of these things they had could save even one Jew. None of the things they were doing outwardly could change them inwardly. They too were lost and in need of the salvation that can come only through being justified by faith. Bottom line, they needed Jesus. But when He was right there among them, they were blinded and could not see. They did not know the day of their “visitation.”

And Paul knew this as well as anyone. He was one of the teachers who were instructing the foolish. He was one of the religionists who were persecuting the followers of Jesus. So I think here, Paul is speaking to the Jews from experience. Look what he says next (verses 21-33):

²¹You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? ²²You who say, “Do not commit adultery,” do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

Once again, think about this from the perspective of the Jews being privileged.

They had this special revelation from God that He wanted them to share with the world. But instead, they did the very things they were teaching against. Their teaching had no power to bring transformation. This was evidenced by the lack of change in themselves.

We know from Mark Chapter 7 that the Jews stole by their practice of what was known as “corban.” Corban, an offering that is alive, means “given to God.” A Jewish son

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would declare something corban to prevent his parents from benefitting from it. Once, say, an animal is declared as corban (remember, corban is a live offering), a son could tell his parents that it has been devoted to God and could not be offered to them for their use. After all, the son would say, since the animal is corban (devoted to God), it is no longer his to offer to his parents for their use (milk from a cow, etc.). It was a form of stealing from one's elders.

They also abused the sacrificial system. If a pilgrim came with an animal offering, guess who would look and see if it was acceptable? The Jewish leaders. Quite often they would not accept the animal so the worshipper would have to buy one of the temple animals — from them, of course. And these were not cheap.

They also charged exorbitant temple taxes, robbing the people who came there. This makes me think of all the TV evangelists of our time who take advantage of the flock for their own personal gain. They have done untold damage to the body of Christ.

They were thieves, but how were they adulterers?

Well, they allowed men to divorce their wives for almost any reason. The person who divorced someone and then remarried was causing their partner to commit adultery. And some of them did have concubines. The fact of the matter is that God hates divorce. And that does not speak well of the church.

We are just as bad as the world when it comes to divorce, and quite often we do so for the same reasons. We leave our spouse for another man or woman. And when we do, we commit what?

Adultery.

And sadly, this happens often among our pastors and leaders. God's plan is simple, as we have talked about before. One man. One woman. One family. One God. That is God's economy, and anything outside of this is unacceptable to Him. Look at verse 23:

²³You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law?

Remember the story we looked at last time about the Pharisee and the publican? All the Pharisee did was to boast in the law. But there is an old adage that applies here. It is, "He who talks the most does the least."

If you have to tell people about how much you are doing, there is a problem. Because, if you were really doing what you said, it would be evident for all to see. And if you are boasting about it and don't do it, what happens?

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You dishonor God.

By the way, this verse makes me think of our politicians. If you want to know what they are doing in the dark, just listen to what they are accusing others of doing. That is how the Jewish leaders were operating as well. And this was the effect it was having on the world (verse 24):

²⁴For “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,” as it is written.

This is a quote from the prophet Isaiah. It was designed to make the first-century Jews think back over the history of Israel. At least three times in Isaiah, Israel was called to be a light to the Gentiles. But far from being a light, they were often a stumbling block. Israel’s sin caused the name of God to be blasphemed and not glorified. We learned that well in our studies in Daniel and Ezekiel. From the time of Nebuchadnezzar to now there has been a time period called the “**times of the Gentiles.**”

When the Babylonians destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, this time began. Israel has not had a king sit on her throne since. And it was all because they refused to serve God and follow His plan.

So God used the Gentile nations to punish His people for their sins. But this also caused them to blaspheme God.

Because they had conquered the Jews, they thought they had conquered their God as well. And this has lasted to our time.

The Jews would be scattered all over the globe shortly after Paul wrote this letter. And they would not return for some 2,000 years. The land that God gave Israel, the “**land of milk and honey,**” became a desolate and sparsely inhabited wasteland.

I would say that qualifies for God being blasphemed amongst the nations.

Israel’s greater privileges put her under greater responsibility, but she failed.

Before we move on, we need to take a quick look at this verse in light of what is happening in the church today.

The body of Christ is now charged with being a light to the world. And in many ways, we are failing just as bad as Israel did.

We have watered down God’s Word to make it more palatable to people.

We have made church a place to come and get entertained.

We have joined with the world by accepting its practices as “normal” when they are not.

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We are not looking for Jesus to return, because we are taught that we can have our best life now.

And we have done a lot of this in the name of love.

I cannot tell you all the people I knew in Reno who went to *happy church* and thought they were okay because they were taught half-truths. When they fell away, it blasphemed the Lord.

I had a girlfriend who, after I accepted the Lord, said this to me, “I tried the Jesus thing but it didn’t work.”

These people thought that God had no power to help them change their lives. But, in reality, they never knew Him. I know that I went to Sparks Christian Fellowship for almost a year before I came to know Jesus as my Savior. And it was not through the church, but a friend, who led me to Him.

We need to preach the Word of God in season and out, and that means telling people the truth. If that ruffles a few feathers, so be it.

So, having said all this, I think we need to understand what an ethnic Jew thinks about their relationship with God. It is probably difficult for him or her to think they are anything other than chosen and thus saved.

After all, aren’t all Jews circumcised to prove they belong to God?

Haven’t they been set apart from birth?

They think they are.

All Jewish males are circumcised on the eighth day of life. This ritual authenticated the Old Covenant that God made with the Jews. They had to do nothing but be born to enter into that covenant. And that is true. But we will learn later in Romans that just being born a Jew was not enough.

You see, circumcision is just a symbol. It was never meant to save anyone. Even in the Old Testament, God told Israel that He was looking for an inward change. In Deuteronomy 10:16 God told the Jews this:

Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.

Jeremiah the prophet echoed this command when he wrote this (Jeremiah 4:4):

**Circumcise yourselves to the LORD,
And take away the foreskins of your hearts,
You men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem,**

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No outward ordinance or ritual can save a person. God is looking for a change of heart, not of flesh. And that is where Paul goes next. Look at verse 25:

For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.

Did you know that in Paul's time the Jews were so proud of themselves and their rituals that they called the Gentiles "the uncircumcision?"

Once again, the rabbis told them that no circumcised man would see hell. This was actually taught in one of their holy books called the Midrash. So the Jews felt safe, and spiritually secure, because they were circumcised.

But Paul's language for them is pretty strong here. And, again, we have to remember that this is coming from someone not too far away from believing this.

He was essentially saying that the Jew was no better off than a Gentile. And even worse than that, they were just like a Gentile. If they kept the law, then circumcision was of some benefit.

But how many of them really kept the law?

How many of them were like Paul, the Pharisee?

Not many.

So I bet this sent a shock wave through the Jewish community in Rome. But Paul's logic is irrefutable. Look at verses 26-27:

²⁶Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? ²⁷And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you who, even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law?

Paul is saying that an uncircumcised person who followed his conscience kept the law, even though he did not know it. That person had a circumcised heart. But the physically circumcised person who did not keep the law was uncircumcised. I really like how Sandy Adams described this in his commentary. He said:

If a uncircumcised, pig-eating, Sabbath-working Gentile loves God, and has faith, he ends up more acceptable to God than the orthodox, kosher-eating, circumcised Jew. Pleasing God is about faith and not form.

Circumcision was important for the Jews, but God never wanted a pound of their flesh. He was always after their heart.

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Did you know that in ancient times the Egyptians also circumcised their boys?

But that did not make them followers of the true God.

Even in Abraham's day Ishmael was circumcised. But it did not make him a son of the covenant.

The truth is, circumcision (and baptism and other such rituals for that matter) does about the same thing that a label on a can does. If the outer label doesn't match what is inside, there is something wrong. If you have carrots on the inside but peas on the label, it doesn't change what is inside the can.

Being born again changes what is inside the can. Then you can change the label on the outside. Paul makes exactly this point as he finishes the chapter. Look at verses 28-29:

²⁸For he is not a Jew who is *one* outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; ²⁹but *he* is a Jew who is *one* inwardly; and circumcision is *that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.*

True circumcision, Paul says, is a matter of the heart. It is done in the Spirit and not in the letter of the law.

So the physical act of circumcision, and baptism in our time, is a picture of what God is doing inside a person. Next time we will look a little deeper into this.

Here is the bottom line of what we have in chapter 2:

Paul was talking to the Jews about their rites and rituals. But he was not saying that God had abandoned His plan for Israel. He will make it abundantly clear in chapters 9-11 that God still looks at the Jews in a special way. We know that to be true, because He has brought them back, miraculously, into their land. What Paul wanted them to understand here is that their privileges of birth, special revelation, ritual, and the law were not enough to save them.

And that is true of Christianity as well. Baptism, tithing, church attendance, and the like will not save you. It may get you the praises of men, but not praise from God.

The rightness of our relationship with God is seen in good works that come from the heart — a changed heart. And it manifests itself in fruit.

So, should we get baptized?

Of course. It is an outward expression of what Jesus has done inside us.

Should we take communion?

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Yes. Jesus told us to do so in remembrance of Him.

Should we be law-keepers?

If you are not, I ask why not. The Ten Commandments and, in fact, all of God's precepts are not suggestions. They come from a Father who knows best.

But can any of these things contribute to your eternal salvation?

NO — not at all.

There is only one way to be righteous. Jesus is the Way.

The just shall live by faith.

Let's pray.

REVELATION SONG: HE IS COMING BACK AGAIN!

He is coming back again
He's coming back again
My Jesus He's coming back again

May be morning night or noon
I hope it's very soon
My heart tells me He's coming back again

He is coming back again
He's coming back again
My Jesus He's coming back again

May be morning night or noon
I hope it's very soon
God's Word tells me He's coming back again

MY JESUS, HE'S COMING BACK AGAIN!!!