

Romans 2:28–29 For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, and true circumcision is not something visible in the flesh. ²⁹ On the contrary, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart—by the Spirit, not the letter. That person's praise is not from people but from God.

vv. 12–13 establishes that no one who merely possess Moses' law code will be exempt from God's condemnation.

Rom 2:12–13 “For all who sin without the law will also perish without the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³ For the hearers of the law are not righteous before God, but the doers of the law will be justified.”

Illus. One of our kids (who shall remain nameless) failed their first driving test. They took the classes, heard the laws, could even pass the written exams, and practice drives—but when it came time to show up and take the final driving test, the student did a “rolling stop” through stop signs and stop lights—and immediately failed. Now that student could not appeal to the fact that they obeyed every other driving rule, they couldn't appeal to the fact that they had sufficient exposure to the teaching materials, Showed up for class to **hear instruction on traffic laws**. No, receiving their license depended on whether or not they obeyed all of the laws in the car with the instructor.

So, Paul means to say that having a fine Abrahamic heritage, knowledge of the law by synagogue attendance, merely hearing and possessing Moses' law is not grounds for immunity from judgment.

What we've discovered is that from 2:1–16 Paul has used the rhetorical device of diatribe—which is to create a hypothetical dialogue partner known as “You are without excuse, whoever you are” (Rom 2:1 NET). His message has been to warn anyone who would presume to judge others by taking the moral high ground against the utterly depraved and sinful as was described in Chapter 1:18–32. **Now he turns more sharply to his fellow Jews—undercutting any trust they had in their pedigree.**

And the first thing he says here is...

1. Preaching Moses' Law provides no immunity from judgment (2:17–24).

Illus. At the height of the Covid-19 Pandemic statisticians and researchers kicked into high gear—surveying peoples' attitudes and beliefs about the virus. It was an ad nauseum stream of data that after a while just became a low hum—a noise in the background that you couldn't even pay attention to anymore because of the constant and rapid pace of it.

But one statistic stood out to me that I thought was worth saving—and I saved it for this sermon. Did you know that across the board—55% of Americans with religious faith (in anything really) held the belief that God would be more apt to protect them—with an added immunity due to their religious affiliation.

As it turns out, the virus was no respecter of religion—secular and religious people alike contracted it. Religious affiliation alone conferred no immunity.

And in the same way, Paul means to communicate to his countrymen, his fellow Jews, “Don't think for one second that your mere religious affiliation as a 'hearer' of Torah is going to confer upon you an exemption from final judgment.”

He lists 4 privileges of being an Israelite (vv. 17–18)

Rom 2:17-18 “Now if you call yourself a Jew (their title “Jew” *Yehuda* meaning “praise of Yahweh”) and rely on the law, and boast in God, (their trust—they've put their confidence and hope in law-keeping for righteousness) ¹⁸ and know his will, and approve the things that are superior, (the Jewish moral system is obviously superior to paganism and atheism. The horrendous inequities in the Greco-Roman culture caused by nonsensical pagan idolatry—and the abhorrent lack of personal rights in cultures like North Korea or China which are atheistic, never having a Judeo-Christian value system to borrow from. One example is the horrific situation of half breeds born half Chinese and half North Korean and sent to work in labor camps in Gulags because neither state will recognize them as a human being worthy of dignity or rights) being instructed from the law (boasting in their culture of constant instruction and education).

- **They have the title**—Jew “one who brings praise to Yahweh”
- **They have the trust**—they rely upon—are confident in their own righteousness.
- **They have the ten commandments**—a clearly superior law to the idiocy of pagan religion and the abhorrent worldview of naturalism.
- **They have the teaching**—a bookish religion in a world of mass illiteracy. They are the most well instructed well taught people in the world.

Who wouldn't want to be a Jew? What pride, what a boast to be the people of God, with the law of God, knowing the mind of God and having been endlessly instructed in it?

He lists 4 pretensions as a result (vv. 19–20)

¹⁹ and if you are convinced that, and rely on the law, and boast in God that you are a guide for the blind, (Matt 15:14 “blind guides”; Matt 23 “woe to you blind guides”). In John 9 Jesus healed a blind man at the pool in the temple on the sabbath...“I came into this world to expose those who are truly

spiritually blind—since you claim to “see” your blindness remains) a light to those in darkness, (According to Isa 42:6; 49:6 Israel was supposed to be a light to the nations) ²⁰ an instructor of the ignorant, a teacher of the immature, (In **Rom 10:3**—these very people are “ignorant of the righteousness of God and attempted to establish their own righteousness, they have not submitted to God’s righteousness”); having the embodiment (*morphosis*) of knowledge and truth in the law (Later Paul will refer to the Jews themselves in 2 Tim 3:5 as those who have the “embodiment” (*morphosis*) of godliness and yet deny the power of it—which is the Spirit).

- **They presume to be leaders for the blind.** But the truth is that they’re blind guides.
- **They presuppose that they are a light to those in darkness.** Yet, as we shall see they have routinely chosen darkness and idolatry.
- **They assume the posture of lecturing the ignorant on matters of faith.** Yet, Paul says because you’ve rejected the revelation of the righteousness of God which is in your Messiah—you’re actually ignorant.
- **They suppose that they are the living embodiment of the sacred trust of Scripture—custodians of the Law.** Yet they deny it’s power.

He’s highlighted 4 privileges, 4 pretensions, now he continues...

He brings 3 proofs to indict them (vv.21–24) And all of these evidences he marshals to prosecute them fall under the rubric of “Hypocrisy.” He asks, ²¹ you then, who teach another, don’t you teach yourself? (It’s not hard to preach the truth. What’s hard is getting up on Monday and living it). Don’t read right over this—the only sin that cannot be forgiven—is self-justifying hypocrisy which refuses to admit our failings.

- **1st Evidence: Failing to pay their tithes as diaspora Jews.** You who preach, “You must not steal”—do you steal? (he’s referring to the national scandal of failing to pay the temple tithes (Mal 3:8; see *Pss. Sol.* 8:11–13; *T. Levi* 14.5).
- **2nd Evidence: Committing adultery—metaphorically for the nation and literally for the individual.** ²² You who say, “You must not commit adultery”—do you commit adultery? (broken by Israel nationally as God repeatedly, in their Prophets, charged them for national adultery as unfaithful idol-worshippers).

Jer 3:8 “I observed that it was because unfaithful Israel had committed adultery that I had sent her away and had given her a certificate of divorce.”

Jeremiah goes on to describe in multiple passages the obscene acts of prostitution on the hillsides, rampant infidelity among the prophets, priests and the people literally.

- **3rd Evidence: Robbing Pagan Temples.** ^{22b} You who detest idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? ²⁴ For, as it is written: **The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”**
 - (More than a few ancient witnesses record dubious and questionable behavior in this regard. Deut. 7:25 forbade the Jews from even touching an idol—but ancient historians such as Chrysostom and Josephus record incidents of rabbis purchasing stolen temple idols that recirculated in the markets—and then contriving legal loopholes that allowed them to resell those idols for a profit.
 - **Additionally, there were some unscrupulous zealots who sought to rob temples of their expensive accoutrements** under the guise of donating the profits to the Jerusalem temple—and the proceeds never reached the temple.

- First century historian Josephus describes certain Jewish men who literally caused the Jews to be exiled from Rome because of their thievery: “He then living at Rome, professed to instruct men in the wisdom of the laws of Moses. He procured also three other men, entirely of the same character with himself, to be his partners. These men persuaded Fulvia, a woman of great dignity, and one that had embraced the Jewish religion, to send purple and gold to the temple at Jerusalem; and when they had gotten them, they employed them for their own uses, and spent the money themselves; whereupon Tiberius (AD 19), who had been informed of the thing by Saturninus, the husband of Fulvia, who inquired about it, ordered all the Jews to be banished out of Rome. (Josephus *Antiquities*. 18.3.5).

Summary: You who boast in your trust in the law do you dishonor God by routinely breaking it? Now, Paul says, all of this hypocritical moralistic religion—while corporately and privately breaking the Torah, has scandalized Judaism and reflected poorly on the Jewish God as the Gentiles curse his name because of their corporate and private failure.

Paul’s conclusion: “Listen, righteousness according to the law—hasn’t worked out for us.”

What Paul is driving at here is that even the most vocal, ardent teacher of the Moral Law of God revealed to Moses—if he takes a hard look at his own soul, a close look at his daily moralism—he would come to see his own hypocrisy. He sins all the time. And Moses said, whoever would presume to live by this moral code must abide by all of it. But who can do that?

2. The badge of covenant membership is receiving the Spirit not physical circumcision.

Rom 2:25-28 “Circumcision benefits you if you observe the law, but if you are a lawbreaker, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. ²⁶ So if an uncircumcised man keeps the law’s requirements, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? ²⁷ A man who is physically uncircumcised, but who keeps the law, will judge you who are a lawbreaker in spite of having the letter of the law and circumcision. ²⁸ For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, and true circumcision is not something visible in the flesh. ²⁹ On the contrary, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart—by the Spirit, not the letter. That person’s praise is not from people but from God.”

The covenant sign of circumcision was always and ever only intended to point toward a spiritual circumcision of the heart. It was a physical sign of a spiritual reality—now made possible by the outpouring of God’s Holy Spirit to baptize and fill the NT believer.

Deut 10:16 “Therefore, circumcise your hearts and don’t be stiff-necked any longer.”

Deut 30:6 this is a promise after a prophecy that they will disobey and receive all the curses for disobedience to the covenant, including exile, “The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your descendants, and you will love him with all your heart and all your soul so that you will live.”

Jer 9:25–26 “The nations are uncircumcised in their flesh, but you are uncircumcised in the heart.”

Jer 31:31–34 vv. 31, 32 God says he will make a new covenant with Israel and that it would not be like the old one...” “Instead, this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days”—the Lord’s declaration. “I will put my teaching within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴ No longer will one teach his neighbor or his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know me, from the least to the greatest of them”—this is the Lord’s declaration. “I will forgive their iniquity and never again remember their sin.”

This covenant is defined by a genuine internal change where God’s Word is written on the heart—when individuals will “know the Lord.” It is a covenant marked by a permanent forgiveness of sins which strongly implies the fulfillment of their sacrificial system by a final atoning sacrifice.

He finishes the section by giving us a stark contrast between unbelieving Jews who possess the law code and its accompanying sign—circumcision, and believing Gentiles who have been brought into this new covenant by faith and reception of the Spirit. Just look at the contrast...

Unbelieving Jew (with physical circumcision)	Believing Gentile (with “circumcision” of the heart)
Breaks the law without the power of the Spirit (v. 25)	Keeps the law because they have the power of the Spirit (vv. 26–27)
Outwardly circumcised as a sign of covenant membership (vv. 25, 27–28)	Inwardly “circumcised” as the sign of new covenant membership (vv. 26, 29)
Seeks to obey the letter in his own strength (v. 29)	Is able to obey the law through Spirit empowerment (v. 29)
Will be judged by those who’ve been consecrated by the Spirit (v. 27)	Will judge those who only have physical circumcision without the Spirit (v. 27)
Failed to live up to their title: “those who praise God” (v. 25)	Receives a new title “those who are praised by God” (v. 29)
Final Outcome: National Israel who only possesses the letter but not the Spirit, the physical symbol but not heart transformation—will not be justified on the day of judgment.	Final Outcome: Gentiles who become obedient to God’s truth revealed in the Jewish Messiah—receive the promised Holy Spirit, live in a new covenant in Christ’s blood, and can expect to be justified by faith on the day of judgment.

Application:

1. We are challenged today to let go of our trust in religious affiliation and the external works prescribed by it. Nothing we possess in ourselves—a **religious title**, a **denominational association**, **church membership**, or even strong **doctrinal instruction** is going to confer upon us an

immunity from final judgment. Like the Jews who trusted in their national privileges as God's original people—we must let go of every external thing that we would otherwise trust in as the grounds of being declared justified before God.

2. We must be careful not to become “blinded” by our own self-righteousness. Jesus said to the Pharisees in John 9 “since you claim you can see—then your blindness remains.” Folks, the key to receiving sight—knowledge of the truth is to humbly admit that we do not see as we ought. That our sinful nature blinds us to what is true about us.
3. We must avoid anti-semitism and Christian Zionism. These are two extremes that we must avoid as Gentile Christians. Paul is going to anticipate that some Gentiles will instinctively want to cast national Israel, ethnic Jews aside. Sadly, historically this is just what took place especially after the last Jewish revolt against Rome led by Bar Kochba and his followers (AD 135). Now Paul anticipates this and asks in the very next chapter “So what advantage is there in being a Jew? Much in every way—they have considerable advantage” and in Rom 11 he's going to ask “So has God rejected his people? By no means.” Don't even imagine that God has cast Israel aside and replaced them with you. That's just missing the point.

But we must also avoid the opposite extreme—an undue emphasis on national Israel which frankly denies the Gospel of Jesus. I've heard preachers say patently unbiblical nonsense about God saving Jews because Paul says that “All Israel will be saved” later in Romans. But that context is about a remnant within national/ethnic Israel and ethnic Gentiles—all those whom God has set aside for himself (the elect from among those two groups), who are the chosen remnant (he literally uses the example of the 7000 Jews set apart in the time of Elijah).

Listen, we must avoid a kind of ethnic replacement theology that is patently unbiblical, and also an unwarranted or excessive emphasis on national Israel which can lead us to denying the Gospel.

Hey, I'm super happy that national Israel is a democracy. That they have free and fair elections. I am not happy about the ethnic and religious persecution that is going on there right now.

But every single one of those Jews in that state need Jesus Christ their messiah and savior or they will stand before God and be declared unrighteous.

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