

“Hear and Obey God’s Word”

Lesson Text: Romans 2:12–24, 28–29 **Background Scripture:** Romans 2:1–29

Devotional Reading: Ezekiel 36:25–30

Romans 2:12–24, 28–29 (NIV)

¹² For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law ¹³ (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified; ¹⁴ for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, ¹⁵ who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them) ¹⁶ in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel.

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

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

TODAY’S LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Facts:** To humble ourselves and be reminded to trust fully in Christ for our salvation, not our own good works.
- **Biblical Principle:** To explain the importance of circumcision of the heart.
- **Daily Application:** To make a plan to ensure that your actions serve as teaching examples.

INTRODUCTION

Heart Surgery

A dear woman in a church where I ministered went into the hospital for heart surgery. When I made a post-surgical visit, I was surprised when her husband told me the surgeon had replaced a defective valve in her heart with a valve from a pig’s heart. This use of a “porcine valve” in a human heart has now been practiced for over thirty years. It is known as “receiving xenographic tissue,” meaning from a non-human source.

Once rare and dangerous, various types of heart surgery are now common. Included are “minimally invasive” or “keyhole” procedures, where small incisions are made and repairs involve tiny cameras and robot-assisted tools. The ultimate heart surgery is the heart transplant.

In Paul’s day, the necessity of the heart for human survival was recognized, but surgical repairs to a heart were unknown. However, Paul used the term “circumcision of the heart” way back then. Perhaps Paul, an avid student of the Word borrowed the term “circumcision of the heart” from Moses (see Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4). This lesson explores what Paul means by this curious choice of words.

Just Judgment: Romans 2:12–16

In verse 11 (just before today's text in your Bible), "for God does not show favoritism" would shock the Jew, for he considered himself deserving of special treatment because he was chosen by God. But Paul explained that God is impartial because He does not change His pattern "first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" whether the righteousness or unrighteousness is involved (also see v. 10 in your Bible).

In verse 12 of today's lesson, we see that unchecked and unatoned sin leads to eternal punishment whether we are in the law or without the law. As a way to express the distinction between Jews and Gentiles in Paul's day was to say that Jews were *under the law* while Gentiles were *apart from the law*.

The law that Paul had in mind was given by God through Moses for the nation of Israel: the Law of Moses. The first five books of the Old Testament, often called the Pentateuch, embody this law.

The Jews knew their law well. It was the basis for their faith, having been studied and practiced for centuries. Yet they had knowingly broken that law, and they could not avoid being judged according to those violations.

The Gentiles, for their part, had not been given this special revelation of law from God. Even so, Romans 1:18–21 establishes that Gentiles could not escape judgment by pleading ignorance. "...It is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight but, it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous" (v. 13 of today's lesson). To be *declared righteous* in this sense means to be free from penalty for breaking the law.

1. How do we know that God judges fairly when it comes to sin and the law? (Romans 2:12-13)

What Do You Think?

Knowing that the Old Testament law in itself cannot bring salvation, what value can Christians experience from studying it?

Digging Deeper

Does your answer change when you expand the question to include the entire Old Testament? Why or why not?

Although the Gentiles do not possess the Old Testament law, nevertheless they do those things which are *required by the law*. This is because of *the law ... written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness* (v. 15). The Gentiles manifested a moral principle at work in their hearts, because when they broke their own ethical code, their conscience would prick them and cause them to feel guilt. The result of their guilt, however, was they would excuse themselves by making a defense for their actions.

2. In what way will Jesus judge our secret thoughts (Romans 2:14-16)?

What Do You Think?

What role does conscience play in following the Spirit's leading?

Digging Deeper

How do you guard against a "seared" conscience that follows deceptive teaching (1 Timothy 4:1–2)?

But Jew and Gentile alike must face a day of judgment with God when *God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ*, according to the truth of the *gospel* preached by Paul (v. 16). He sees what is in the heart!

The *gospel* (Bible) sees the Lord as the always-righteous judge and humans as always-unrighteous and guilty of sin, thereby incurring the wrath of God (Romans 2:8; 3:23). In essence Paul was saying we can only be declared righteous because Christ has paid the penalty for our sin (3:21–26; 4:25; 5:18).

False Faithfulness: Romans 2:17–24

Paul turned his attention to the teachers in the church of Jewish background. His propositions that begin in this verse are of the conditional “if ... then” type. Such arguments feature one or more hypotheses (if-statements) followed by a logical conclusion.

These hypotheses are what we might call a “résumé of righteousness”—a listing of things the Christians of Jewish background might smugly cite as evidence of their superiority to Christians of Gentile background. The Jews of Paul’s day claimed to know the divine plan and desires of the Creator (v. 18). They were sure that their catechetical training in the law as a youth, and rabbinical training as a man gave them confidence that they could discern those things that were “superior.”

Before reaching the conclusion of the argument, Paul adds more hypotheses (vs. 19-20). These two verses describe the ancient Jewish attitude toward Gentiles. As *a guide for the blind*, the Jew had spiritual insights that the Gentile lacked (see Isaiah 35:5). Combined with the image of being *a light for those who are in the dark*, the situation describes spiritual blindness—the Gentile inability to know and follow God’s will fully (compare and contrast Isaiah 9:1–2 and Acts 13:47). The Jews living by God’s law were to be a model of righteousness that condemned sin (Isaiah 51:4) while drawing people to God and His glory (60:3). Consequently, Jews believed themselves to be instructors and even teachers *of little children* (the Gentile was immature, an object of Jewish disgust) in that regard.

3. What did Paul say to the teachers who boasted in their credentials? (Romans 12:17-20)

What Do You Think?

In what circumstances are you a teacher?

Digging Deeper

How can you remain confident that what you do and say are teaching the same lesson to your “students”?

Paul now moves to a series of questions which surely reflect the actual situation within the Roman church, where Christians of Jewish background had regained positions of leadership and teaching, lording over those of Gentile background. Paul’s solution is to begin by questioning the consistency and sincerity of the teachers. Failure in this area results in being hypocrites—a condemnation on the lips of Jesus more than a dozen times in the Gospel of Matthew (see especially chapter 23).

The Jews were prepared to teach the heathen Gentiles the commandments of the law, but were themselves breaking the commandments: Do you steal? (the eighth commandment). You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? (the seventh commandment). You who *abhor* (declare to be evil) idols, do you *rob temples*? (have blasphemous behavior).

The squeaky-clean moral image the Jews wished to project to the Gentile world was filled with hypocrisy (again, Matthew 23). Their pride in the Law of Moses was dishonored by their failure to keep that law. The Jews through their hypocritical behavior among the Gentiles were dishonoring the name of God (v. 23 of today’s lesson).

4. What specific ways did Paul call out the Jewish teachers of the law when it came to practicing what you preach? How can we apply this to ourselves? (Romans 12:21-24)

What Do You Think?

What habits reveal the earnest conviction of your heart?

Digging Deeper

What habit would you like to break or develop to live in a way that reinforces your desire for God’s praise over people’s?

As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

This quotation from Isaiah 52:5 confirms that the inadequacies in the lifestyles of the Jews caused the Gentiles to speak harshly of the God of Israel. The Word of God was actually being blasphemed among the Gentiles because of the inconsistency of the Jews. Much the same thing could be said today about hearers of the Word but not doers. The Jews rested in His law but since they did not keep it, His law could not make them righteous.

5. Ultimately who got the bad rap for the way that Jewish teachers of the law were behaving? (Romans 12:24)

Paul began this section by appealing to those who proudly call themselves Jews (Romans 2:17). He now defines what a Jew is not in the ideal sense. Jewish identity is neither an issue of outward appearance in general nor the covenant sign of physical circumcision (or lack of it) in particular. Those are mere considerations of the flesh (v. 28 of today's lesson).

No, Paul said in verse 29 that 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.

Being a Jew in the ideal sense is an issue of the heart, by the Spirit, not that of the flesh, which focuses on the written code of the Law of Moses. Therefore being a Jew in this sense is neither a matter of biological ancestry nor of adherence to the Law of Moses. In offering this proposition, Paul lifts the discussion above physical realities to that of spiritual realities. But that wasn't really anything new! God had always desired circumcision of the heart (again, see Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4). To have a circumcised heart was to relinquish stubborn disobedience and be free to love God without limits. For Christians, it is to say with Jesus, "Not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

Truly following God is a matter of the heart, the inner being, not a surgical procedure on the physical body. Demands for strict, even slavish adherence to the Law of Moses may have elicited praise from men and women, but not necessarily the approval of God (Matthew 23:23-24; etc.). God knows our hearts, and he knows both Jews and Gentiles are sinners without excuse.

Many places in the Bible teach us that God looks upon our hearts (example: Psalm 44:21) and sees us as we truly are. Indeed, the Lord made David the King of Israel because God knew what was in David's heart (1 Samuel 16:7; Acts 13:22).

6. What did Paul have to say to those who called themselves Jews because of circumcision? (Romans 12:28-29)

CONCLUSION

The idea of the circumcised heart was powerful for Moses and Paul, and must be for us today. Can we humble ourselves and leave behind our tendencies to be stiff-necked? Can we trust fully in Christ for our salvation, not our own good works?

Paul's exposition for the rest of the book of Romans required both Jews and Gentiles realize their need for God's salvation because all are under the power of sin (Romans 3:9). For both groups, hope comes not from keeping the law, whether it be the law of the conscience or the Law of Moses. It comes from faith in Christ.

PRAYER Heavenly Father, may our hearts turn away from pride and sin and toward you in faith and hope. May our trust be only in your Son, Jesus. We pray in his name. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER God wants a humble, obedient heart.