

Romans: The Difference Between Inward and Outward Righteousness

Romans 2:25-29

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If you would, please take your Bibles in hand and turn with me to Romans, chapter 2, and look at verse 25. We'll continue to work through this great letter of the apostle to the church of the Romans. Romans, chapter 1, verses through 18 through 32. The apostle had made it clear that the Gentiles needed His gospel by demonstrating their immorality. All along the religious people of his day, his fellow Jewish friends, were shaking their head, nodding in agreement. Yes, they do need God. They are immoral. They need to be changed to be transformed.

And then, beginning in Romans, chapter 2, verse 1, Paul turns his attention to the Jews, and he says, "And by the way, you need my gospel, too; for your hope is vain, and you're not walking with God. And you're under His condemnation." And they responded, "Oh, No, Paul, you don't understand. We have the law." And he said, "Well, I know that, you don't keep it." And they said, "Well, we have the election of God. God has called us out amongst all the nations, and He has made us a people of His own. He brought us out of the land of Egypt, and He made us into a great nation." And the apostle Paul said, "Yes, but you forget that even in the Old Testament, there were Jews who were not those who loved God. There was Jacob and Esau. Jacob have I loved. Esau have I hated. Jacob, son in the line of Abraham, lover of God; Esau, not. Ishmael and Isaac, and so on." And they said, "Yes, but we have a unique calling that sets apart from the Gentiles. We have been called to be a light to the Gentiles." And Paul says, "I know. In fact, you've been such a bad witness that the name of God is blasphemed amongst the Gentiles because of you." And so they reach for one last argument. And the apostle blows one last argument out of the sky.

That's where we are today in Romans, chapter 2, beginning in verse 25.

For indeed circumcision is of value, if you practice the law. But if you are a transgressor of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. If therefore, the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the law will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision and will not he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the law, will he not judge you who

though having the letter of the law and circumcision are a transgressor of the law. For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the spirit, not by the letter, and his praise is not from men, but from God.

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, it is an indispensable requirement in understanding scripture to see and understand our own sin. So we pray this day that You would show us the sinfulness of our own hearts that we might understand our need of the gospel, open our eyes, that we might sit under the searching authority of Your word. And be found out, and then be drawn to our Savior. We pray, O Lord, that You would be honored in Your word, for we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

The apostle Paul throughout Romans, chapter 2, is aiming to deal with those who are hypocrites, those who are outwardly devoted to God, and yet who have no real expression and experience of love to God from the heart. The apostle is also aiming here to deal with what we could call gospel hypocrites. For Paul is not simply saying something here that is relevant for first century Jews in Palestine. What he is saying here is relevant for us all, especially those who have enjoyed the privileges of growing up and hearing for many years the gospel preached in a gospel-preaching church. The apostle Paul is aiming for those, you see. He has a false assurance. Let me give you a grid to think about before we go into the main passage together, because we'll come back to this again. Imagine a cross. Make a strike down and a strike across so that you have four boxes. In the upper right box you have believers who have assurance. In the upper left box you have believers who do not have a full and healthy assurance. You're struggling, your doubtful. Down in the lower right box you have unbelievers who have assurance. You heard me right. We'll come back to that again. Unbelievers who have assurance of their salvation. They're standing with God. And over in the bottom left you have unbelievers who do not have assurance of their standing with God. So across the top line you have believers. Along the bottom line you have unbelievers. In the right hand boxes you have assurance. In the left hand boxes you have the lack of assurance. Now remember that.

Paul is speaking throughout this passage to what we might call gospel hypocrites. Those who have a profession of belief in God, but those who have no reality of saving faith and experience of grace. And Paul is working very hard throughout the second chapter of Romans to bring arguments against gospel unbelief. To bring arguments against those who are assured of their standing with God, but who ought not to be. And I've already listed for you some of the arguments that have been thrown up to him as he says to the Jewish people. "You need my gospel." Their response is, "No, we don't. We already know God. And, we can prove it. We have the law. We're set apart from all people because

we have the law." And the apostle Paul says to them, "Well, I know you possess the law, but you don't keep it. That nullifies the advantage of your possession." And they say, "Yes, but we've been chosen by God. We can show you Deuteronomy 7. We've been chosen amongst all the nations." And the apostle Paul says, "Yes, you have been chosen. Indeed that doctrine of election is a glorious doctrine, but you also need to pick up your Old Testament and read and recognize that there are many people who are the children of Abraham who have rejected the covenant promises. And God has revealed Himself in His word to have rejected them, "Jacob I have loved, and Esau I have hated."

And then they come back with another argument. "Yes, but God has chosen us to be a light to the Gentiles. We can show it to you in any passage in the Old Testament." The apostle Paul says back to them, "I know that. I know that we have been chosen to be a light to the Gentiles, a blessing to the nations, and yet you've forfeited that responsibility. You not only neglected it. But you've actually turned the responsibility upside down so that your unbelief and your immorality has been a negative witness to the Gentiles. And, in fact, the name of the one true God is blasphemed by the Gentiles because of your immorality."

What is Paul doing there? He is kicking every possible prop for their assurance out from under them. They have the leg of the stool of their divine election. They have the leg of their stool of their calling. They have the leg of the stool of their possession of the law. And now in this passage today, they're going to throw out one more leg of the stool of their assurance, and that is circumcision. The possession of the promises of the covenant which was sealed in the sign of circumcision. And Paul says, "Look, all of these things, apart from the realities to which they point, apart from real love to God and love to man, apart from a saving relationship with Jesus Christ will do you no good. All of these things are false assurances taken apart from the promises of God's grace and the covenant of grace which are realized in Jesus Christ." So Paul is attacking every false place or location of assurance that he can find. He's knocking every prop out from under them so that they will recognize their need and come to Christ and be able to have the real truth, real salvation and real assurance. And that's all Paul is doing in this great argument. This is the conclusion of his argument in Romans, chapter 2. And I'd like you to see two things in this passage before us

I. Covenant signs avail for nothing apart from covenant realities. .

First of all, in verses 25 through 27 Paul, having dealt with their argument from the law, their argument from their election, their argument from their calling, now undercuts their argument from circumcision. They said, "Paul, we don't need your gospel. We've got circumcision. We're the inheritors of the covenants of promise given to Abraham, sealed in circumcision." And Paul basically comes back to them, and he says, "Look, covenant signs mean nothing apart from covenant realities. You can claim that sign of circumcision all along, and yet your heart

does not show signs of heart circumcision, true consecration to God, true love to God, true love to your neighbor. Paul is here continuing to diagnose a spiritual problem amongst this religious people. Hypocrisy. They are spiritually deluded. They are comfortable and secure.

My friends, notice Paul is saying they are unbelievers who have assurance. Now let's remember our box again. Believers with assurance, believers without assurance, unbelievers with assurance, unbelievers without assurance. Paul loves to preach to unbelievers without assurance. They are one step from the kingdom. They are not saved, and they know it. They are ripe to hear the gospel. Paul loves to preach the gospel to believers who lack assurance because he can assure them and the promises of God made to them, that they have not fully realized yet, and moved them into spiritual maturity where they can be secure in their faith. He loves to preach the gospel to believers who have assurance because they grow in their grounding in the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.

But let me tell you, those unbelievers who have assurance, they are a hard nut to crack. So the apostle is throwing out every argument that can come to mind to undercut their false assurance, not because he hates the Jewish people, not because he doesn't care about them, but precisely because he loves them. He does not want them to be spiritually deluded. He does not want them to be secure when they ought not to be. And so every place that they are running, other than Jesus Christ to find their assurance, he's cutting it down. The law, it will condemn you. Your election, it will condemn you. Your calling, it will condemn you. Your circumcision, it will condemn you. Only Christ.

What is Paul doing? He's wanting them to see themselves as they are in order that they will accept the gospel. They've already said to Paul. Paul, we don't need your gospel. Paul said back to them. Yes, you do need my gospel. And they've given him four arguments why they don't, and he's shot down every single one of them. And he's saying what? "Not just this, not just that you are immoral, and you are in need of grace," but he's saying to them, "You need the grace that is supplied by my gospel. You need the grace that is supplied only by Jesus Christ. Don't look to these other places. Don't look to these other places."

So Paul in this passage is speaking to these Jews who have defended themselves by their appeals to the possession of Moses' law and of national election and divine calling, and the covenant, and he says this. "Look, a life pattern of disobedience to the very heart of the moral law. To love God and love neighbor overthrows your superficial adherence to the ceremonial law. You come back and you give me the ceremonial law." And you say, "Well, we've been circumcised." He says, "I don't care. Because the thrust of your life is out of accord with the moral law of God. And the whole reason that God gave the ceremonial law was to confirm the reality set forth in the moral law. And the moral law itself is not a way of salvation. It's an expression of life having been received by grace through the redeeming work of God in the old covenant. God didn't say

keep the law, and I'll bring you out of Egypt." He said, "I'm your God. I brought you out of Egypt. Now, keep the law."

So these things that you're looking for for your security with God, they're only going to condemn you. You've got to have my gospel. The hope of the covenant signs, and the hope of the new covenant is for a heart obedience. The work of God's grace works in us so that we have the law written on the hearts.

And this is not just a new covenant principle, it's an old covenant principle. Let me show you. Go back to Deuteronomy, chapter 10 and look at verses 12 through 17. Here's Moses speaking to the people of God, and he says to them this. "Now Israel, what does the Lord your God require from you." You'll hear Micah echoing those words many, many years later, won't you? "What does the Lord your God require from you? But to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul." It's no mistake, is it, that Jesus comes right back to this as the summation of the moral law and calls it the greatest commandment. "And to keep the Lord's Commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good, behold to the Lord your God belong heaven and the highest heavens, the earth and all that is in it, yet on your Father's did the Lord set his affection to love them. And he chose their descendants after them. Even you, above all people, says it is to this day. So circumcise your heart and stiffen your neck no longer." What is the response to the grace of God to be if one has really received it? To circumcise your hearts. And the apostle Paul here in verses 25 through 27 is saying, "Your circumcision, my dear fellow Jew, is of no value because your hearts aren't circumcised. And because your hearts aren't circumcised, your fleshly circumcision has become uncircumcised. It's as if you never received the law, you never received the promises, you never received the calling, you never received the election, you never received the covenant because you've rejected the heart of the covenant.

And then again in Jeremiah, chapter 31, you remember when Jeremiah is giving his vision of what the new covenant is going to be like in verses 31 through 34, he says this in Jeremiah 31:33. He says, "This is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days declares the Lord. I will put my law within them, and on their heart I will write it, and I will be their God; and they shall be my people.

And again, there's the dream of the covenant, of the new covenant, the new covenant of grace. And these will be the people who have the law in their heart. And Paul is saying, "Look you people are telling me that you are people of God, and I don't see the law in your heart. I don't see love for God, I don't see love for your neighbor. I don't see a real obedience to the law of God. I don't see a love for His word. I don't see a response to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ who is the Messiah of God. And so don't be assured. You're unbelieving, but you're very secure. And it's so important to remember what Matthew Henry said so long ago.

He said, "You know, sometimes those who are most secure are those who are most in danger. These people are secure in their spiritual self-delusion." And so the apostle Paul is kicking out from under them every prop on which they base that security. Why? So they will be miserable? Not in the long run. So that they won't trust in something that won't fail them in the end. He longs for them to embrace the one thing that can give them the security that they need.

But my friends, he's not just speaking to those Jews in first century Palestine. He's speaking to us. And you say, "We're not trusting any ritual adherence to the ceremonial code." But you know what? How often have you talked to a person who has no sign, no sign of real interest in God. No love to God, no love for His word, no obedience to His word, no love for the people of God, no sign of the fruits of the spirit. And you talk to them about spiritual things, and what do you hear? "Well, I walked the aisle. I've signed a card. I made a decision." Isn't it funny how it's always past tense? "You know this happened thirty-five years ago, and nothing has happened since. And I'm absolutely assured." You see the question is, where is the present faith? It's not, did you once upon a time trust in Christ? The question is, are you now trusting in Christ? And if so, how is that showing in our life? And the apostle Paul here is uncovering gospel hypocrites. T

The mere possession of a covenant sign, circumcision or baptism, means nothing apart from real grace and the consequent righteousness. By the way, this is one reason why we believe as Presbyterians, along with most Protestants, that baptism, the covenant signs, are not absolutely necessary for salvation. And there are many churches that teach if you're not baptized, you're going to hell. The thief on the cross, then, was in trouble. Even though Jesus said, "This day you will be with Me in Paradise."

Why are they not absolutely necessary? Because the apostle Paul says that those outward signs set forth an inward reality. And the inward reality in absence of the outward sign is as if you have the outward sign. And the outward sign in the absence of the inward reality is as if you have the never received the sign. And, therefore, there may be some circumstances where a person is unable to receive the sign. Oh, we'll never reject the sign. We'll never make little of the sign. We'll never neglect the sign, but there may be some circumstances where it's impossible for that sign to be applied. You know there are some places where there's a child in the hospital born sickly, going to die, a few hours old. They'll rush to the hospital to perform a baptism, lest that child be plunged into hell. Oh no, my friends, the outward sign is not of the essence of the reality. And, therefore, there will be some circumstances where the outward sign cannot be applied. But the inward reality makes it as if the person has received the outward sign. That's one thing we learned from this passage.

We also learn in this passage that Paul is laying the groundwork for how the Jew and the Gentile will relate in the kingdom of God. They will be made into one household so that those who are uncircumcised, it will be as if they were

circumcised. And those believing Jews who have trusted in the Messiah as their God and Savior, they, too, will be united in the one house, no longer separated by the ceremonial law. Jew and Gentile together. But mostly what Paul is saying to us here is that we need the gospel. He's saying to those who are secure apart from Christ, those who are secure apart from a living faith, he's saying that apart from the righteousness freely granted by God, no one can ever attain to the state of being accepted by God. And he's saying that to people who are religious. You know you've probably heard of John Bunyan and some of you have probably read *Pilgrim's Progress*. I loved that great allegory. And I like the book that he wrote about the Christian life called *The Holy War*, and I loved the autobiography that he wrote, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. One of my favorite books, but one of the scariest books by John Bunyan, is called *The Life and Death of Mr. Bad Man*. Bunyan was always so subtle, wasn't he? The story is about a gospel hypocrite. That is, a man who has been born and reared in the church, he's gone to church every Sunday, he's lived a fairly moral life, he dies in complete security about his eternal destiny, and he plunges directly into hell, because he had never really embraced Jesus Christ as he is offered in the gospel by faith. His assurance was false. And Paul is speaking precisely to that person today. And my friends we must take heed that our assurance is found in Christ. Is it on Christ the solid rock we stand, or is it somewhere else. If it's somewhere else, you're in that box. And Paul doesn't want you to be there. He wants you to be in this box, the unbeliever who realizes his lack of assurance so that He can move you to this box, the believer with full assurance in the right thing for eternity.

II. The righteousness of the new covenant is inward and moral.

And then there's a second thing here in verses 28 and 29. Paul asserts a very different definition of what it meant to be a Jew than his opponents accepted. And he teaches us here that the righteousness of the new covenant is inward and moral. Though, of course, it is expressed outwardly. It's inward and moral rather than being merely external and ceremonial and ritual and symbolic.

Notice the four contrasts that he gives you to help you know the difference between true righteousness and false righteousness: Outward, inward, flesh, heart, letter, spirit, men, God. Let's walk through them.

First, verse 28. "He is not a Jew who has won outwardly but," verse 29, "he is a Jew who is one inwardly." In other words, Paul contrasts a parent and perceived righteousness with real righteousness. He's not a Jew merely outwardly, but he's one who is inwardly.

Secondly, notice what he says. "Circumcision of the flesh versus circumcision of the heart." This is a person who has been circumcised by flesh. That's ritual righteousness. Circumcision of the heart, that's real righteousness. T

Thirdly, notice the contrast. Letter, spirit. "By the spirit, not by the letter," he says, in verse 29. This is a contrast between mere compliance with the ceremonial law and spiritual adherence to the moral law.

Fourthly. Notice the contrast. "Praise from men and praise from God." Just like Jesus had critiqued the Pharisees who longed to have what? The approval of men, the praise from men. The contrast between the truly righteous person and the one who is only apparently so is that the truly righteous person longs to be righteous in the eyes of God, but the only apparently righteous person longs for the praise of men. And there's a play on words in that last parallel between approved of men and approved of God. Praise from men and praise from God. Paul does a play on words in verse 29, when he speaks about the Jew whose praise is not from men, but from God. Judah, you may remember from the Old Testament, is the word from which we get the word Jew. And the word Judah was connected in the Old Testament to the idea of praise or to the word praise. Let me give you an example of that. Turn back to Genesis, chapter 29, verse 35. When Leah gave birth to Judah, this is what she said: "She conceived again and bore a son, and said this time I will praise the Lord. Therefore, she named him Judah." Do you see the connection between the praise of the Lord and Judah? Notice again as Jacob speaks in Genesis 49, verse 8: "Judah, your brothers shall praise you. Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies. Your father's sons shall bow down to you." And so Paul says the true Jew, connected with the idea of praise, is praised not by men, not by mother and father, or onlookers, but by God. This person, the truly righteous person longs to have the affirmation of God rather than the affirmation of man.

Can you hear Jesus teaching in the background? Practice your righteousness before your heavenly Father so that He who is in heaven can see your deeds of righteousness. Do not practice your righteousness before men to be praised by them. Paul's doing a play on words here. The difference, you see, between inward and outward righteousness is that outward righteousness is superficial apparent. It's only perceived, but it's not real. It doesn't penetrate the surface. It doesn't flow from a heart which has been redeemed. It doesn't flow from a heart which has been spiritually regenerated by the work of God's holy spirit. And the apostle Paul says, "Look at your life. And if your life only bears marks of that superficial righteousness, then perhaps your trust has been false." Perhaps you have never really known what it means to receive the grace of God, and Jesus Christ. So flee to Him. Flee to His gospel.

You see Paul has undercut everyone who says, "Well, Paul, I don't need your gospel." Paul has made it amply clear. "If you're going to see God, you need my gospel." And so today, my friends, we ask ourselves as we look at our lives, and we see a profession of faith. Along with that profession of faith do we see true love and esteem for Jesus Christ? Do we hold Him in high esteem? Do we love His word? Do we acknowledge the authority of the holy Scriptures and long to

have our lives guided by it? Have we grown in love to God and love to neighbor, love to man? Have we seen the spirit working in us those fruits which wage war against the flesh and its lust and cause our hearts to be more and more conformed to the desires of God? Have we been captured by a spirit of truth, or are we bound to the spirit of this age?

The apostle Paul is saying to us, "We don't see the marks of the spirit's work in us." Ask the question, are we really trusting in Christ? If you're really trusting in Him, God is at work in you to do that which is well pleasing in His sight. Don't trust on that which cannot give you assurance. Trust on the only one who can assure you forever, Jesus Christ as He's offered in the gospel. May the Lord bless His word. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we bow before You. We acknowledge that You are the one true God and the only way of salvation. And we ask this day that You would help us to search out our hearts, to see if we're truly trusting and resting in You. By Your grace keep us from deluding ourselves with spiritual delusion. Keep us we pray from gospel hypocrisy. Help us to really and truly trust alone in Jesus Christ for our salvation. And so find in Him that complete and full assurance provided only by the Holy Spirit. We ask these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

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