

## Romans Part 9 – Chapter 2:12-29

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Remember in the previous section of verses, Paul divided all of humanity into two categories: Those who lead good lives and are given eternal life by God (Romans 2:7) and those who are self-seeking and earn God's wrath (Romans 2:8). God will judge each person according to that standard, Paul wrote, no matter whether Jew or non-Jew.

This seems, at first, like an endorsement of salvation by works. However, as Paul will show later, the first category is empty. Nobody is able to escape their own selfish and disobedient nature. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," he will say in Romans 3:23.

Now Paul begins to answer all of his readers who are asking, "What about the law? Won't the law protect the Jews from the wrath of God?" Paul describes two more categories for humanity: those who sin "apart from the law" and those who sin "under the law." Paul is referring to the law of Moses, given to Israel by God at Mount Sinai, as described in Exodus 20 and beyond.

Notice that both of these categories contain those "who have sinned." There is no third category of people, no group who have not sinned.

### **Romans 2:12**

*<sup>12</sup> For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.*

Sinners without the law of Moses to follow—the Gentiles—will die and be judged by God without the law, because their sin is still sin. Sinners under the law—Jewish people who adhere to the rituals and sacraments of the law of Moses—will be judged by God according the law of Moses when they die. Each person is held to the standards of their own knowledge, and as Paul has already pointed out, God has given every person enough knowledge to be without excuse (Romans 1:18–20).

The point Paul is building towards is that the verdict will be the same in all cases. All have sinned, no matter what standard of good and evil they lived under.

### **Romans 2:13**

*<sup>13</sup> For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.*

Some of Paul's Jewish readers had made the mistake of thinking that by simply being Jewish, they would be declared righteous by God and spared from His wrath for their sin. After all, they were under the law of Moses. Most Jewish people grew up listening to the books of the Law read aloud from the time they were infants. Remember this from our study in **Joshua 8:34-35**: *And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law.* <sup>35</sup> *There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them.*

By definition, Jews were "hearers" of the law. They knew the words. They understood the big ideas. And they were part of the chosen people of Israel.

Paul argues that just being under the law and hearing it regularly was not enough to save anyone. Hearing the words of Moses's law could not make anyone righteous. In order to be declared righteous in God's eyes, one must *obey* the law. In fact, Paul will later point out that a person living under the law would have to obey the law *perfectly*, in every way, in order to be declared righteous by God. Nobody was able to do that until Jesus arrived.

This passage of Romans parallels the message of the book of Hebrews, which clarifies how the old covenant, including the law of Moses, was never meant to save man from sin. It was only meant to teach mankind, to prepare them to accept a Savior.

### **Hebrews 10:1–10:**

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. <sup>2</sup> Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? <sup>3</sup> But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. <sup>4</sup> For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

<sup>5</sup> Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,

“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,  
but a body have you prepared for me;

<sup>6</sup> in burnt offerings and sin offerings  
you have taken no pleasure.

<sup>7</sup> Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God,  
as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’”

<sup>8</sup> When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), <sup>9</sup> then he added, “Behold, I have come to do your will.” He does away with the first in order to establish the second. <sup>10</sup> And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

### **Romans 2:14**

*For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law.*

In verse 13, Paul argued that Jewish people living under the law did not become righteous before God merely by *hearing* the Law read. They had to keep the law, and keep it perfectly, in order to be truly righteous.

Now Paul mentions that some non-Jewish people—Gentiles—end up keeping parts of the law "by nature," even though they are not required to do so by God. In other words, the human conscience sometimes prompts people to "do the right thing" even without having a written law to tell them to do it. This parallels Paul's point from earlier in this letter that God makes certain things obvious to all

people (Romans 1:18–20). In this way, those Gentiles allow their consciences to become a kind of law for them to follow. They might not even know what is included in the written books of the Law given to the Israelites.

### **Romans 2:15-16**

*<sup>15</sup> They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them <sup>16</sup> on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.*

We know we will be transparent before Almighty God. **Revelation 2:18** - *“And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: ‘The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.*

Also note that Paul is not suggesting that a Gentile who lives by his conscience will be declared righteous by God. His point, as implied here, is only that such a person is following some kind of minimum standard for right and wrong.

### **Romans 2:17**

*<sup>17</sup> But **if** you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God...*

Paul has just finished talking about God's judgment for Gentiles: people not under the requirements of the law of Moses. Now he turns the case he is making to the Jewish people who do live under the law.

This verse begins an if-then statement that will be concluded as this passage continues. Paul describes three specific good things that come with being Jewish.

**First**, one who understands himself to be a Jew is a member of the nation of Israel, God's chosen people (Deuteronomy 7:6). It is a high honor.

**Second**, such a person may "rely on the law." Though the law of Moses was a weighty thing for Israel, it was also a gift, the revelation of God's standards for how to live on earth. The law was given to Israel and no other nation.

**Third**, this person, a Jew who relies on the law, can also "boast in God." Paul is not describing selfish bragging. The Jewish people could rightly boast that the one true God was their God and they were His people (remember Joshua!). Their glory as a people was found in belonging to the glorious God.

### **Romans 2:18**

*<sup>18</sup> and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law*

Now he further defines the people he is talking to. These people do not simply rely on the law of Moses. Through it, they know God's will, and they use His law as a standard by which to decide if anything is excellent. They can do this because they have been so well taught from Moses' law.

After building up this group for all their knowledge and understanding, Paul will challenge their actual behavior in the following verses.

The larger point he is making is about their misplaced confidence. These people have confidence that God will not judge their sin, because of their identification with the law. This is assurance aimed in the wrong place. Paul uses this idea to show how the Jewish people are as guilty as the Gentiles, and must be saved by grace and not the law.

### **Romans 2:19-20**

*<sup>19</sup> and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, <sup>20</sup> an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—*

Now Paul adds that this person can serve as a guide to the blind and a light to those in darkness. In other words, God gave His law only to Israel. Thus, they had the opportunity to show everyone else what was true and who God was. They possessed the light of God's truth that others needed.

Paul, however, is leading all of this buildup to a negative. He is asking that if all these things are true for Jewish people, why don't they live according to the law? This is part of Paul's short-term goal of showing that even God's chosen people (Deuteronomy 7:6) fall short of His standards of perfection. In the longer view, this supports Paul's point that all people need to be saved by grace, through faith, apart from their own works (Romans 3:22–25).

### **Romans 2:21-23**

*<sup>21</sup> you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? <sup>22</sup> You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? <sup>23</sup> You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.*

Paul has set his Jewish readers up for a series of difficult questions. His larger purpose is to challenge those who assume that being Jewish means they do not have to worry about God judging them for their sinfulness. They believe the law of Moses stands between them and God. In a broader sense, this point is meant to apply to anyone who tries to rely on their own religiosity in order to be right with the Lord.

Paul has asked a series of leading "if" questions: If you are a devout Jew, if you rely on the law, if you boast in God, if you are sure you are a guide to the blind, if you're a teacher of the foolish and of children, if you truly have the law which you believe to be the embodiment of knowledge and truth...then why don't you follow it?

More specifically, Paul begins in this verse by asking why the teachers don't teach themselves. He then follows with three examples of not following the law. If they preach against stealing, do they steal? It's not clear what, if any, examples of theft Paul has in mind. What is clear is Paul's larger point: Having the law is not enough. You must also keep it. And, as he will explain later in this letter, nobody can perfectly keep it (Romans 3:10).

### **Romans 2:24**

*<sup>24</sup> For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."*

Paul quotes from Isaiah 52:5 (*and continually all the day my name is despised*) to drive home his point that those under the law "dishonor God by breaking the law" (Romans 2:23).

When Isaiah wrote, the name—the reputation—of the God of Israel was sneered at by other nations because His people were being oppressed. In contrast, Paul now says God is dishonored by Israel's own actions. By breaking the law of Moses, they give God a bad name among the Gentiles. Seeing that the Jewish people break their own God-given law while looking down on others, the Gentiles respond by speaking blasphemously about Israel's God.

This highlights an important point which applies to believers in Christ, today. When those who claim to be Christians behave in un-Christ-like ways, it dishonors God. Non-believers see those sins and blame them on the faith. As Paul made clear earlier in this letter, that's not a valid excuse for rejecting the truth (Romans 1:18–20). However, those who claim the name of God need to be extremely careful about the kind of reputation we create in this world.

The point Paul is building up to is that nobody can keep the law of Moses perfectly (Romans 3:10). *Everyone* breaks it, somehow and somewhere, bringing dishonor to God. *Everyone* deserves God's judgment as a result of their sin. The law only helps to reveal sin, so salvation must come from another source. That source is faith in Christ (Romans 3:22–25)

### **Romans 2:25**

*<sup>25</sup> For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.*

Now Paul answers the next logical objection, coming from a Jewish mindset: What about circumcision? Being circumcised, in obedience to God's command to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17:9–10), ensured that Israelites would be identified as God's people, the Jews. Apparently, many Jewish people believed that those who were circumcised were, by definition, saved. They would not be judged by God even if they broke His law. The ritual, for them, was enough to establish their salvation.

Paul disputes that idea, but he does not discard circumcision itself. He acknowledges that circumcision matters for the Israelites; it is an act of obedience in and of itself. However, the whole point of circumcision is lost if a Jewish person under the law breaks God's law.

These words would have come as a shock to religious Jews who believed they were saved through circumcision and belonging to God's chosen people. They should challenge the attitude of anyone who thinks that religious rituals, ceremonies, or other sacraments can overcome the stain of sin.

### **Romans 2:26**

*<sup>26</sup> So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?*

Now Paul goes even further with a teaching sure to infuriate Jewish religious leaders. He writes that the opposite is also true. If a Gentile—an uncircumcised, non-Jewish man—adheres to the principles of the law, his lack of physical circumcision won't prevent him from being regarded by God as one who is circumcised.

Paul is teaching that everything comes down to whether a person keeps God's law or not. This applies whether one is Jewish or Gentile. Later, Paul will demonstrate that *nobody* is able to keep the law

(Romans 3:10). This means that everyone deserves God's angry judgment. Salvation must be found somewhere else, other than in rituals or good works (Romans 3:22–25).

### **Romans 2:27**

*27 Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law.*

Paul has painted a picture of two men. One is Jewish and circumcised and under the law of Moses. He breaks the law. The other is Gentile, uncircumcised, but he keeps the law of Moses. He obeys it. In what would have been a deeply offensive shock to his Jewish readers, Paul said that circumcision is of no use to the Jewish lawbreaker. Worse, he suggested that a lack of physical circumcision is no hindrance to the Gentile law-keeper. The first will be regarded by God as if he were not circumcised and not Jewish; the second will be regarded as if he were circumcised and Jewish, even though he's not.

Now Paul concludes that the Gentile law-keeper will condemn the Jewish law-breaker, even though he has been given the law by God and has been circumcised. The only difference between them is whether they kept the law or not.

### **Romans 2:28**

*28 For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.*

Paul adds another shocking statement to those in the previous verses. He has said, in essence, that when it comes to being judged by God, Jewishness doesn't even matter. Specifically, the ritual of circumcision, which identifies someone as part of the Jewish community, is meaningless when not accompanied by obedience. Only those who keep the law will be declared righteous. Later, Paul will write that no one is able to keep the law.

### **Romans 2:29**

*29 But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.*

Paul concludes this section by defining what is required to be truly Jewish. Paul was born Jewish, lived as a devout Pharisee (Philippians 3:4–7), and was converted to faith in Christ for his salvation. He is more than fully qualified to address this issue. Paul has recently indicated that true Jewishness is not about mere birth and circumcision. Circumcision, likewise, is not "outward and physical."

Now he states the positive side of this claim. True Jewishness, to be included in the people of God, happens inwardly. True circumcision is about the sincere heart of a person. That circumcision is "by the Spirit, not by the letter."

Bible scholars disagree about whether the word spirit in this verse should be capitalized. In other words, is it talking about Holy Spirit or not? If so, then Paul is saying that this heart circumcision, this being set apart as a member of God's family, is carried out by God's Holy Spirit. That fits with other passages that describe the role of the Holy Spirit in salvation. If Paul is referring to the Holy Spirit, this is his first mention of Christian salvation.

The alternative is that Paul is referring to someone being circumcised in their own spirit, not by following the mechanical requirements: "the letter of the law." Or, perhaps Paul means that this heart circumcision is about following the spirit of the law and not about the letter of the law.

In any case, true Jewishness is about what happens inside a person and not just about being born an Israelite and being circumcised. Paul insists that Jewishness must be sincere from the inside out. This basic principle applies to Christian faith, as well. Labels and behaviors are not what matter; it is *faith* which identifies us as a true believer.

When it is sincere, when a person is circumcised in their heart and set apart with God's people, that person is praised by God. After all, God knows our hearts. Otherwise, this person receives praise only from men who see the outside actions of a person that may or may not be sincere. The praise of men is far less valuable than to be praised by the God who truly knows us.

## **Romans 2:12-29**

*<sup>12</sup> For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. <sup>13</sup> For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.*

*<sup>14</sup> For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. <sup>15</sup> They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them <sup>16</sup> on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.*

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Dr. David Jeremiah on “*Is faith enough for salvation?*”

*Yes, it's really that simple. Romans 10:9 says, “If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” Ephesians 2:8-9 states it this way, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” Beyond trusting Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior of our lives, there is nothing you and I must do (or can do) to earn God's love and forgiveness.*

### *The Role of Works*

*The Christian life does not end there, and neither does the passage. The next verse in Ephesians explains the purpose underlying God's rich kindness: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (2:10, emphasis added).*

*These works are the natural result of a relationship with God, and He provides the power to accomplish them through His Holy Spirit. When we trust Jesus Christ as our Savior, the power of Almighty God is unleashed in us; He energizes us and electrifies us to live a godly life. The strengthening of our faith is a joint effort by our Savior and ourselves, but many Christians miss the importance of adding works to their faith. And without realizing it, they limit the Holy Spirit's power in their lives.*