

“Circumcision of the Heart”

- Romans 2:17 - 29

by Pastor Tim Dodson
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Romans 2:17 - 29 *Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest 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. 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. 26 Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? 27 And 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? 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 praise is not from men but from God.*

One could easily blow right by this passage, feeling that “not being a Jew” that these verses are simply someone else’s mail.

But to write off this passage as for someone else would be missing Paul’s greater picture. A picture presented in this passage as not only for the Jew in Rome, but for us, the reader of the Word today, whether that be Gentile or Jew. For false security, a security in a false ideal, has the same result whether it be the Old Testament Law for the Jew, or the modern pseudo-law that is so prevalent in the greater church today. See, we can begin this passage as “...if you are called a "Church goer" ...or called a Christian or Religious Person, etc,

17 Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest 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...

Paul was directly confronting his Jewish brethren, who were feeling quite safe from God's judgment because they had the "safety net" of His Law since they were born. And we in the non-Jewish world have our perceived “safety nets” also. If you rest upon your profession of faith, the fact that you were raised in a Christian family, grew up in church, or that you have been baptized, or that you attend church regularly, etc. then you are having faith in the wrong thing! That mistake can cost you your eternity.

Both the Jew in Paul’s day and many within the larger church of God today, believe themselves to be the: “guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, and teacher of babes (young believers).” These spiritual folks have “a *form* of knowledge and truth” but as 2 Timothy 3:5 says they “deny its power.” This speaks volumes concerning Paul’s Jewish brethren, as well as my Gentile brethren! Their problem in short was that they were in essence "hearers" of the Law, but they were not "doers" of the Law. They had “belief” but lacked passion, commitment, and real transformational life change. They knew *of* God but didn’t really *know* God!

The Jewish leaders in Paul's day interpreted (rather "misinterpreted") the law in such a way that they considered themselves "justified" (declared righteous) by the Law, yet that was something the Law could not do and was in fact

never intended to do. Galatians clearly tells us that the law was meant to be the “schoolmaster.” That which would expose our inability to achieve God’s holy standard and make the grade by following rules and embracing religious rituals. In other words, the “law,” when understood correctly and received righteously, does well its perfect work by exposing our inability to ever earn our way or work for our fare to gain access to God or eternity with Him.

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.

Paul bluntly seeks some answers about all of this from his Jewish brethren. We need to understand that these questions could be just as righteously asked of the average Christian today. While Paul addresses himself to the Jewish leaders, we need to ask “what about us?” Do we practice what we preach? Because in truth we so often fail to do so. This is not about our shortcomings or our human failure to “meet the mark” of a righteous and holy lifestyle. This is not about living our faith in integrity and still never knowing perfection because of our fallen state. Paul is speaking of knowing God’s will and still purposely refusing to obey! Do we think that the unbelieving world is unaware and ignorant of our abuse in this area? The truth is, because of our hypocrisy the world often ridicules the faith and “blasphemes the name of Jesus!”

Indeed Paul was dealing with the lazy and the non-committed. But he was also dealing as Jesus did, with the apostate. The individual who had/or was committing **apostasy**. That’s a strong word, I know. Few of us could ever imagine being guilty of such a verdict! Yet we need to understand what the scope of the term encompasses. For apostasy...beyond the apocalyptic definitions, also means “**abandonment of a previous profession or loyalty**.” Wow. That certainly causes some pause doesn’t it? For in that case I know a lot of people who have committed apostasy! The bible certainly takes this crime seriously and the penalty for such is extreme.

According to B. J. Oropeza, (the Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies in the Division of Religion and Philosophy at Azusa Pacific University) the warning passages in the New Testament describe at least three dangers which could lead a Christian to commit apostasy:

#1 - Temptations: Christians tempted to engage in various vices that were a part of their lives before they became Christians (idolatry, sexual immorality, covetousness, alcohol abuse, isolation, bitterness, emotionalism, etc.).

#2 – Deceptions and lies: Christians who encounter or participate in various heresies, false teachings, lies, and verbal slanders spread by false teachers, prophets, and disgruntled people, all of which threaten to seduce them away from their pure devotion to Christ and the body they have been assigned to.

#3 - Persecutions: Christians were persecuted by the governing powers of the day for their allegiance to Christ. Many Christians were threatened with certain death if they would not deny Christ. Today they are persecuted for spending too much time at church, committing too much of their hearts and lives to Christ, and for attributes and practices that do not adhere to current worldviews and social agendas.

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. 26 Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision?

The Bible shows us that the most difficult people to reach are people who trust in their religion. They relish their rituals and religious traditions, and bet their eternity on what they *do* or *don't* do. They may not admit such publically but in reality they don't see their need for a redeemer from sin because they view themselves as pretty good people. They aren't drowning so why would they need someone to save them? They think they are right with God because of their religious performance (Luke 18:11-12).

Circumcision was and is the literal “cutting away of the flesh.” Yet Paul’s point here was that such is so spiritually as well as physically. For us, the picture presented here is clearly presented in the practice of baptism. Both circumcision and baptism are outward signs of what is to ultimately to be an inward work. In 1 Peter 3:21...speaking

of Noah and the flood, we read “And that water is a picture of baptism, which now saves you, **not by removing dirt from your body, but as a response to God from a clean conscience.**” It is effective because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It doesn’t wash you of sin and guilt, it just says you *have been* so washed by Christ spiritually and practically in real life living. It is a testimony of your spiritual state. Thus it is as much (if not more so) for those who are present and witnessing your act of baptism...especially for those who are fellow participants in your church community and body life!

Circumcision **meant** something to the Jew, just as baptism means something to us in the gentile church today. Just as communion means something to us. But is what Jesus wanted from us was to eat a little piece of cracker and have a swallow of juice? Is that supposed to do something for us? Or is the act of traditional communion to be a mere reflection and acknowledgement of a greater act of communion with Christ and life communion with our brothers and sisters? The unity, commitment, and participation of life and spirit... “eating of his flesh and drinking of his blood.” None of these physical acts...circumcision, baptism, communion, amount to anything if they are not combined with a real corresponding belief and obedience in action! They were and are therefore merely empty religious rituals if they are not the “outward sign of an inward work.” Many of these whom Paul was speaking *to* and speaking *of* were “professors” but not genuine “possessors.” They were in the dangerous deception of religion, ignorant of their lack of a true relationship with Christ. It is an amazing disconnect...in that so often we can’t grasp the concept of “practicing what we preach” and “living out what we verbally profess.”

Please note that Paul does not say that circumcision justifies an individual. And neither does baptism or communion for that matter! These things only count if we are born again and walking in the Spirit! These are not just my words or this churches doctrine, this is what the bible quite clearly says! Just as a wedding ceremony only means something if we are deeply in love and committed to that one for life! If not, it is a meaningless game that children play, along with “Cops and Robbers” and “Hide and Seek.”

Paul clarified his position by drawing a vivid picture: if a man were to actual follow the righteous requirements of the Law, wouldn’t he be in effect truly circumcised? And further, if an individual today were to accept Christ as Savior and Lord and walked in holiness, wouldn’t such be a reflection of his “baptism?” If a man or woman was deeply committed, and “one” with Christ and this body of believers, wouldn’t he or she be participatory in the act of communion even if there was never the little cracker and juice involved? All of this certainly does not mean I am against actual baptism and traditional communion! Quite the opposite actually! However, we aim to take a very biblical approach to such practices and not simply adhere to the religious “party line.” Circumcision, communion, and for that matter baptism, was and is to be “signs” of what has and is occurring in the inward man. The act of circumcision for the Gentile is not so much a religious practice as it is a health practice these days, but it is still even today a critical issue in the Jewish world! But Paul was stepping out of the historical understanding and looking through the eyes of God who started these practices, instead of through the rut of religious ritual. His “bottom line” is that the absence of the sign (or act) would not negate the reality of the spiritual work! If I were to lose my wedding ring, I wouldn’t cease to be married, would I?

27 And 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? 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 praise is not from men but from God.

Furthermore, Paul was saying that just because a man was circumcised, that did not make him a real Jew, any more than baptism or communion makes a person a real Christian. Certainly these things can be highly valued to serve as physical manifests of an inward work...“testimonies” of what has happened inside a man. But Paul and God was and is most interested in that inward “cutting away of the flesh.” The “inward baptism.” The spirit of committed communion. The change **inside** an individual! The “metamorphosis” that occurs upon the anointing of the Spirit of God on an individual.

This passage draws all believers today into the position of “spiritual Jews.” We therefore cannot ignore or “write off” these verses as for the traditional Jew alone. For us, true baptism is something that occurs in the heart of men. It is an act of the Spirit, not of the flesh. True communion is actual relationship with God daily, and with one another in the church, closer than blood brothers and sisters. Again, this in no way is meant to prohibit or even discourage baptism and communion for today’s believer. It is simply aimed to clarify what religious acts such as baptism, communion, tithing, service, church attendance, etc, is and what it is not.

Eze 36:26 *And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart.*

Once we begin to chase this rabbit, suddenly all sorts of realities come into play. One must even consider our very church attendance! For the truth is, many of us believe ourselves righteous before God because we come to church. But without the heart...the passion, the involvement, the other-centered service, the sacrificial actions, the worship and the openness to the teaching, what are we really doing here? It becomes just an empty duty with no effect and no meaning! Many folks will spend a lifetime in one pew or another and then will spend eternity apart from God because being here was never anything more than a “scorecard.” A perceived “point-system” that was understood to make one a “good Christian.” But it doesn’t, and it never did. Unless I actually participate in church beyond the act of coming through those doors and attending yet another Sunday gathering, this is all a very big waste of my time. Unless my church attendance is reflective of a larger ideal and practice, then it too is just another empty and meaningless religious ritual!

We must each consider the question, "Where does our confidence lie?" What are we trusting in today? Does it rest on our knowledge of God’s Word, our church affiliation, our experience of baptism, the practice of communion, our financial giving, etc? If so, we are deluded, dead and doomed. We are still lost...still the old man, still what we always were. This is why we DO know people who have committed apostasy! Those who have “*abandoned their previous profession...thrown away everything they stood for and even taught others, and have abandoned their loyalty to God and His bride the church even after countless participations in the ritual of communion with that very body of believers.*” They went through the motions, but they never actually circumcised their hearts. They never cut away the flesh of their hearts and became a spiritual creature. They never came to repentance and faith in the Gospel! True salvation and eternal life is a matter of the heart. God’s Word is surgical. It is meant to pierce hearts. It is a “repentance not to be repented of.” (2 Corinthians 7:10) For the true child of God, there is no turning back. We are “all in.” Body and Spirit...feet and soul...

Deuteronomy 30:6 *Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.*

Jeremiah 4:4 *Circumcise yourselves to the LORD And remove the foreskins of your heart, Men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, Or else My wrath will go forth like fire And burn with none to quench it, Because of the evil of your deeds."*

Galatians 5:6 *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.*

Ray Stedman in his message **RED HERRINGS!**

*"I have often said to someone, "Well, are you a Christian?" And the answer I get is, "Well, I am a Catholic," or, "I am a Baptist," or "I was raised a Methodist," or, "I've been baptized." In the case of the Jews, it was circumcision. But, as Paul is pointing out here, God isn't fooled one bit by this. There are many uncircumcised (as Paul also points out), and also many unbaptized, unconfirmed, unpasteurized, unsimonized individuals who behave just as well as those who have been baptized, circumcised, simonized, or whatever it is. Do you see? These things do not add anything to a person -- that is the point -- they don't do a thing for you. **Regardless of what you have been taught, there is no value in an outward ordinance or outward ritual -- none whatsoever.** "Well," you say, "what is a religious ritual, anyway? Why are these things here?" And the answer is: A ritual or rite is saying something to God in actions instead of words... Don't insult the God who loves you by muttering some meaningless mumbo-jumbo before him, or play-acting some religious hocus-pocus that leaves you uninvolved, and, therefore, unchanged -- this is what Paul is saying."*