

EXPLANATION OF 45TH BIBLEBOOK

ROMANS 2:17-29 (April A.D. 67)

INTRODUCTION

In Romans 2:17-20, Paul addresses the Jews directly and enumerates the privileges and prerogatives on which Jews prided themselves.

In Romans 2:21-24, he shows the Jews that, if they failed to carry out the obligations or teachings involved in all the privileges they enjoyed, those privileges only aggravated their condemnation. Notice the rising scorn and indignation of Paul against *the hypocrisy of the Jews*: “You teach others, but you do not teach yourself”. “You preach against wrongdoing, but you yourself steal, commit adultery and rob temples”. “You brag about the law, but dishonour God by breaking the law”. “You cause the Gentiles to blaspheme God!”

In Romans 2:25-27, Paul evaluates circumcision. And in Romans 2:28-29, Paul teaches clearly the real nature and purpose of circumcision.

OUTLINE

(III) 2:17-24. God’s principles and criteria of judgement also apply to the Jews.

- a. The legal casuistry of the Jewish theological schools (2:17-18).
- b. The attitude of spiritual superiority of believers in Judaism (2:19-20).
- c. The flagrant inconsistency between what the Jews professed and what they actually practised (2:21-24).

The Jews rely on their covenant relationship with God, their circumcision and their privileges: they possess the Old Testament revelation (2:17), they have more knowledge than the Gentiles (2:18) and they are teachers of God’s law (2:19-20). *But if God is not going to take these privileges into account, but judge all people according to their works, then what is the advantage of being a Jew?* These privileges did not cause the Jews to steal less, commit less adultery or to worship less idols (2:21-22). These privileges did not stop the Jews from breaking God’s law and blaspheming God among the Gentiles (2:23-24). *Because Jews had more knowledge than the Gentiles they will also be judged more severely than the Gentiles.*

(IV) 2:25-29. An explanation of the nature and purpose of circumcision.

- a. The physical circumcision of the Jews has only value if the covenant of grace is kept (2:25).
- b. The uncircumcision of the Gentiles is regarded as circumcision if they keep the covenant of grace (2:26).
- c. The physically uncircumcised will condemn the physically circumcised (2:27).
- d. The real nature and purpose of physical circumcision (2:28-29).

The circumcision of Jews only has significance when Jews keep the law (i.e. the covenant of grace). However, when the law is broken, circumcision is worthless and it is as if the Jew is uncircumcised (2:25). When the uncircumcised Gentiles keep the law (i.e. the covenant of grace) they will not miss God’s blessing (2:26)¹ and they will condemn the Jews (2:27)². *Physical circumcision is thus only an outward ritual that has no power to save (justify) and that does not make a person a ‘Jew’ (someone who receives approval and praise from God). Spiritual circumcision by God’s Holy Spirit in the heart is the real rebirth and transformation everyone needs (2:28-29)³.*

EXPLANATION

(III) 2:17-24. God’s principles and criteria of judgement also apply to the Jews.

a. The legal casuistry of the Jewish theological schools (2:17-18).

2:17. Now you, if you call⁴ (vipm) yourself a Jew; and continually rely (rest)⁵ (vipn) on the law and brag⁶ (vipn) about your relationship to (in) God;

2:18. and always know⁷ (vipa) his will and always approve after testing of⁸ (vipa) the things that really matter (i.e. what is excellent; referring to the legal casuistry of the Jewish schools)⁹ (vppa), being a person instructed¹⁰ (vppp) out of the law.

The name ‘Jew’ is first mentioned in the Bible in 1 Kings 16:6 (before 586 B.C.). During and after the Babylonian exile (from the destruction to the rebuilding of the temple, 586 – 516 B.C., 70 years) it was the name in which the Jew prided himself. The name means *a member of the state of Judah*.

¹ cf. Isaiah 56:3-8; John 10:16

² cf. Matthew 19:28; 1 Corinthians 6:2

³ cf. John 5:44

⁴ G; eponomazó

⁵ G; epanapauomai

⁶ G; kauchaomai

⁷ G; ginóskó

⁸ G; dokimazó

⁹ G; diapheró

¹⁰ G; katécheó

The Jews ‘rested’ on that name, that is, they relied on it and were very proud to be Jews. They found comfort and support in the law, that is, they enjoyed hearing the law and speaking about the law, but they did not practise the law. They gloried in God, that is, they said that they worshipped the one and only God and that they had fellowship with God, but in reality that was merely an empty boast!

They knew God’s will, that is, they possessed the Old Testament as the revelation of God’s will. They approved of what is excellent, that is, they continually argued about God’s will and tested what is in accordance with God’s will (the law), rejecting what differs from it and approving what is in accord with it. They were instructed in the law, that is, they prided themselves that they had received instruction of the law from their parents and teachers by hearing the law¹¹.

b. The attitude of spiritual superiority of believers in Judaism (2:19-20).

2:19. and (if) you are convinced (persuaded)¹² (vira) that you are (vnpa) a guide¹³ for the blind, a light for those who are in darkness,

2:20. an instructor (corrector, one who disciplines)¹⁴ of the ignorant (foolish)¹⁵, a teacher¹⁶ of the immature (infants)¹⁷, because you have (vppa) the embodiment (outward form)¹⁸ of knowledge and truth in (the book of) the law

The Jews considered themselves to be greatly superior to all other nations in the world. They regarded the Gentile nations as spiritually blind and believed that only Jews were capable of instructing the Gentiles. This gave the Jews an attitude of superiority instead of responsibility. They said that the Gentile nations were in darkness, foolish and mere infants! The Jews equated ‘immaturity’ with ignorance of the law and ‘maturity’ with knowledge of the law.

In itself the guiding of the blind, being a light for those that are in the dark, being an instructor for the ignorant and being a teacher for the immature were virtues. Yet Paul said that these same virtues were vices with the Jews, because they boasted about things they themselves failed to do! The Jews boasted that they possessed in the book of the Old Testament (law) the embodiment of knowledge and truth. This means that they boasted that they possessed *a well-ordered form* or system of knowledge and truth¹⁹. Nevertheless, they themselves possessed only *an outward form* of righteousness, but lacked the inner reality of that righteousness²⁰!

c. The flagrant inconsistency between what the Jews professed and what they actually practised (2:21-24).

2:21. you, then, who continually teach²¹ (vppa) another (singular), do you not continually teach (vipa) yourself? You who preach²² (vppa)(people should) not steal (vnpa), do you steal (vipa)?

2:22. You who say (vppa) (people) should not²³ commit adultery²⁴ (vnpa), do you commit adultery (vipa)? You who abhor (detest)²⁵ idols, do you rob²⁶ (vipa) temples?

2:23. You who brag (vipn) about the law, do you dishonour²⁷ (vipa) God by breaking (overstepping, transgression)²⁸ the law?

2:24. As it is written (virp): “The name of God is continually blasphemed²⁹ (vippp) among the Gentiles because of you.”

The distorted conception of their advantages made the Jews self-complacent, and their self-complacency made them hypocritical. In order to shock the Jews out of their self-complacency, Paul exposes their hypocrisy. He gives *three illustrations of teachings* which the Jews imparted to others, but failed to practice themselves. The Jews *continually* (present tense) committed *theft, adultery and idolatry*.

¹¹ Nehemiah 8:8

¹² G: peithó

¹³ G: hodégos

¹⁴ G: paideutés

¹⁵ G: aphió

¹⁶ G: didaskalos

¹⁷ G: népios

¹⁸ G: morfósis

¹⁹ cf. Romans 6:17; 2 Timothy 1:13

²⁰ cf. 2 Timothy 3:5

²¹ G: didaskó

²² G: kérussó

²³ G: me+inf

²⁴ G: moicheuó

²⁵ G: bdelussomai

²⁶ G: ierosuleó

²⁷ G: atimazó

²⁸ G: parabasis

²⁹ G: blasphéméó

Idolatry and sexual immorality were precisely the sins of the Gentiles (cf. 1:24-25), which the Jews condemned the severest, but also committed themselves³⁰. Wherever the Jews were in power, they probably robbed temples of other religions (=theft). Nothing would have provoked the resentment of the Gentiles more than the desecration of their temples. Moreover, the Jews were also in a high degree guilty of dishonouring God, which is the essence of idolatry! The Jews turned their own temple into a den of robbers³¹, they withheld from God his due and they performed their religion not to glorify God, but to be honoured by men³².

The Jews bragged about possessing the law, but dishonoured God by breaking the law. According to James 2:10 and James 4:11-12, disobedience of the law is an insult against the majesty of the Lawgiver, God himself, and it causes the Gentiles to blaspheme God. *The Gentiles expected a nation to be like their God*³³. *And if a nation committed such crimes, as robbing temples, committing adultery and idolatry, then their God must be of the same character and should be dishonoured accordingly.*

(IV) 2:25-29. An explanation of the nature and purpose of circumcision.

a. The physical circumcision of the Jews has only value if the covenant of grace is kept (2:25).

2:25. Circumcision³⁴ indeed has value (benefit, use, profit)³⁵ (vipa) (i.e. if you are already circumcised), but only if you would continually practise (vspa) the law (in the sense of the covenant of grace), but if you continually are (vspa) a transgressor³⁶ of the law (in the sense of the covenant of grace), your (physical) circumcision has permanently become (vira) (spiritual) uncircumcision³⁷.

The word 'law' has several different meanings in the letter to the Romans and the correct meaning is dependent on the context of the word. Here, the word 'law' does not refer to the various Old Testament moral, ceremonial and civil laws, which were given during the time of Moses (1407 B.C.), but rather to the Old Testament covenant of grace, which was established during the time of Abraham (2067 B.C.)! In this Old Testament covenant, God promised that he would be their God and they would be his people³⁸. This was a covenant of promise and grace.

The requirement of this covenant of grace (2:26) was: *faith* in God's promise³⁹ which had to be shown in *obedience*⁴⁰. *The sign and seal of this covenant of grace* was physical circumcision⁴¹.

Paul maintained that physical circumcision as a sign of the covenant of grace only had value when the Jews fulfilled the requirement of faith and showed their faith by their obedience. If the Jews had no faith in God and his messianic promises and no obedience by walking with God, their claim on God's covenant promises was mere presumption and even an empty mockery! Thus, in Romans 2:25-27, keeping (the requirement of) the law is equivalent to keeping the covenant of grace which God made with the patriarchs. And breaking (the requirement of) the law is equivalent to breaking the covenant of grace which God made with the patriarchs. When the requirement of God's covenant was neglected or violated, physical circumcision became spiritual uncircumcision. Then the outward sign of physical circumcision lost its significance (2:25)⁴²!

However during the giving of the Mosaic Law (1407 B.C.) physical circumcision also became a sign of keeping the Mosaic Law (the moral, ceremonial and civil laws of Israel)⁴³. Nevertheless, the keeping the covenant of grace made with Abraham (2067 B.C.) was still the most essential meaning of the Law.

In the period between the Babylonian exile (587 B.C.) and the first coming of Jesus the Jewish religious teachers and leaders had replaced the original meaning of physical circumcision, namely keeping the law in the sense of the covenant of grace by faith and obedience, with their legalistic and outward keeping of the ceremonial law. They did not realise that merely keeping the Mosaic Law (the outward ceremonies) without keeping of the covenant of grace (by faith and obedience) had absolutely no value!

b. The uncircumcision of the Gentiles is regarded as circumcision if they keep the covenant of grace (2:26).

³⁰ Psalm 50:16-18

³¹ Matthew 21:13

³² cf. Mark 7:1-13

³³ Psalm 115:8

³⁴ G: peritomé

³⁵ G: ópheleó

³⁶ G: parabatés

³⁷ G: akrobustia

³⁸ Genesis 17:7; Leviticus 26:12

³⁹ Genesis 15:5-6; cf. John 6:28-29

⁴⁰ Genesis 22:17-18; Hebrews 4:2,6; James 2:17,22

⁴¹ Genesis 17:9-14

⁴² cf. Deuteronomy 30:6

⁴³ Leviticus 12:3; John 7:19,22

2:26. Therefore if the (person belonging to the) uncircumcision (as a state of being) keeps⁴⁴ (vspa) the righteous requirement of the law (in this case: faith and obedience of the covenant of grace)⁴⁵, will his uncircumcision not be regarded⁴⁶ (vifp) as circumcision?

Here, keeping (the requirement of) the law does not refer to unbelieving Gentiles who obey their moral nature and conscience as in Romans 2:14. It rather refers to *Gentiles who have become Christians* as in Romans 1:16-17. The majority of these Gentile Christians were physically uncircumcised.

But because these Gentile Christians fulfilled the requirement of the covenant of grace by their faith in Jesus Christ and their obedience to Jesus Christ, these Gentile Christians become the real people of God⁴⁷ and are even called the 'Israel of God'⁴⁸!

Although these Gentile Christians were uncircumcised in their bodies (flesh), they were circumcised in their hearts (spirits) and God regarded this as the only real circumcision (2:28-29)⁴⁹! On the one hand, the rite of circumcision of the body has no value apart from that which it signifies. On the other hand, when that which the rite of physical circumcision signifies (namely, the circumcision of the heart) is present, the absence of the sign in the body does not annul God's covenant of grace!

c. The physically uncircumcised will condemn the physically circumcised (2:27).

2:27. The by nature (physical) uncircumcised person who keeps⁵⁰ (vppa) the law (in this case: the covenant of grace) will *certainly* condemn (vifa) you who through (i.e. provided with) the written code (i.e. the Mosaic Law) and (physical) circumcision (is) a transgressor of the law (in the sense of the covenant of grace).

The physically uncircumcised Gentile Christians, who fulfilled (the requirement of) God's covenant of grace by believing in Jesus Christ and obeying his teachings, will condemn the physically circumcised Jews, who possess God's written revelation (the Holy Book), but nevertheless *break (the requirement of) God's covenant of grace by not believing in Jesus Christ and disobeying his teachings.*

Likewise, the believing Gentiles of Nineveh in the Old Testament time will stand up in the final judgement day and condemn the unbelieving Jews in the time of Jesus⁵¹. The faith of the physically uncircumcised Gentile believers will condemn the unbelief of the physically circumcised Jews!

All this proves that an external and physical ceremony like physical circumcision or baptism with water has no saving power at all when faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to his teachings are absent. Physical circumcision without spiritual circumcision has no spiritual meaning at all. *Merely outward religious ceremonies are useless.* The outward visible religious sign (physical circumcision) without the reality of regeneration and transformation of the Spirit has no spiritual significance. God is Spirit and demands inward and spiritual obedience.

d. The real nature and purpose of physical circumcision (2:28-29).

2:28. For a (Jew) only in outward appearance⁵² is (vipa) not a (real) Jew (i.e Jewish descent does not make you a real Jew), and a (circumcision) only in outward appearance in the flesh (is) not (genuine) circumcision (i.e. physical circumcision by itself has no significance)!

2:29. But a (Jew) in inward (hidden reality) (is a real Jew), and a circumcision of the heart by the Spirit (and) not by the written code (the law) (is genuine circumcision) (i.e. spiritual circumcision is genuine circumcision); his (of whom)⁵³ praise (approval, recognition)⁵⁴ (is) not from men but from God.

During the time of Abraham (2067 B.C.), physical circumcision was *a sign of justification by faith*⁵⁵. But long after the time of Moses (1407 B.C.) after the Babylonian exile (587 B.C.), the Jewish religious teachers and leaders made physical circumcision *a sign of justification by works of the law*⁵⁶.

Physical circumcision originally was a sign of justification by faith (4:11).

- Physical circumcision during the time of Abraham. God made a covenant of promises and grace with Abraham. In this covenant, he graciously promised Abraham three things: First. Abraham would become the father of many

⁴⁴ G: phulassó

⁴⁵ Genesis 17

⁴⁶ G: logizomai

⁴⁷ 2 Corinthians 6:16; 1 Peter 2:9-10

⁴⁸ Galatians 6:12-16

⁴⁹ cf. Deuteronomy 30:6

⁵⁰ G: teleó

⁵¹ Matthew 12:41-42

⁵² G: phaneros

⁵³ G: hou

⁵⁴ G: epainos

⁵⁵ Romans 4:11

⁵⁶ John 7:19,22; Galatians 5:1-4

nations. His descendants would be as numerous as the stars and as the sand on the seashore. And the Lord would be the God of his descendants. Second. God would give the land of Canaan to Abraham's descendants. These first two promises were already fulfilled by the time Joshua conquered the land of Canaan⁵⁷. Third. God would bless all the nations of the earth through one of Abraham's descendants⁵⁸.

Abraham believed God and God reckoned it to him as righteousness⁵⁹. God gave Abraham physical circumcision as the sign and seal of this covenant of God's promises and God's grace. Physical circumcision was *a visible sign and seal that God justified people through faith*⁶⁰! The people who were physically circumcised were obligated to keep this covenant of God's promises and God's grace. They were obligated to continue to live as people justified by faith, that is, as God's people in this world.

- Physical circumcision during the time of Moses. During the Old Testament period the outward, physical circumcision also had an inward, spiritual meaning. The foreskin that was cut away symbolised the removal of uncleanness. And physical circumcision of the body pointed to the spiritual circumcision of the heart. The cutting away of the uncleanness of the body (flesh) symbolised the cutting away of the uncleanness of the heart⁶¹. Thus, during the Old Testament period circumcision of the body was *a visible symbol* of a much higher reality, namely, the spiritual circumcision of the heart. The circumcision of the body during the Old Testament period pointed to *the later rebirth by the Holy Spirit* during the New Testament period (2:28-29).
- Physical circumcision by itself has no significance. Observing the law and hoping to be justified by keeping the law (for example by getting physically circumcised) without faith that really justifies is meaningless and useless. Physical circumcision of the body without spiritual circumcision of the heart is meaningless and useless. Human religious ceremonies (like physical circumcision) always remains the work of man, but spiritual circumcision of the heart is always the work of God the Spirit!

Therefore, in the Bible, the unbelievers and unrighteous people are called 'the uncircumcised in heart'⁶². But Jewish as well as Gentile Christians, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ, are called 'the true circumcision'⁶³! All people who have put their trust in the crucified Christ and live the crucified life are the genuine people of God and are called 'the Israel of God'⁶⁴! Abraham may be the physical father of those who call themselves Jews⁶⁵, but he is the spiritual father of all people who believe in the God who revealed himself in the Bible, whether they are Jews or Gentiles⁶⁶. Keeping the law (in the sense of the moral, ceremonial and civil laws of Israel) cannot and will not justify any human being in history, because no one can or has kept all the laws⁶⁷.

Physical circumcision later became a sign of justification by works of the law⁶⁸.

- Physical circumcision after Babylonian exile. About 1500 years after Abraham, during the period between the Babylonian exile (587 B.C.) and the first coming of Christ, the Jewish religious teachers and leaders replaced the original meaning of physical circumcision, namely, justification by faith, with justification by keeping the ceremonial laws. The Jews no longer regarded physical circumcision of the body (flesh) as the sign and seal of being justified by faith or of being spiritually circumcised in heart, but regarded it as *God's pledge that God would give eternal life to people who obeyed the law* in the sense of the moral law, the ceremonial law and the civil law of the state of Israel. The Jews wrongfully interpreted Leviticus 18:5 as meaning, "The man who obeys the law (in the sense of the moral, ceremonial and civil laws) will receive eternal life."

Since that time Jews believed that physical circumcision was the sign and seal that God justified (saved) people through the works of the law, even though God *never* gave that meaning to physical circumcision! Physical circumcision on the eighth day of a newborn son became the most important act of keeping the law⁶⁹! Physical circumcision of any man became the religious ceremony by which he became saved⁷⁰! *The work of man in the flesh replaced the work of God in the heart!*

- Physical circumcision during the New Testament period. About A.D. 50 the apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians that if people let themselves be physically circumcised, because they believed that they would be justified

⁵⁷ Joshua 21:43-45; 23:14-16

⁵⁸ Genesis 12:1-3,7; 15:1-6,18-21; 17:1-14; 22:17-18

⁵⁹ Genesis 15:6

⁶⁰ Romans 4:11

⁶¹ Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4

⁶² Jeremiah 9:25-26; Acts 7:51

⁶³ Philippians 3:3

⁶⁴ Galatians 6:12-16; cf. spiritual Israel in Romans 9:6b

⁶⁵ and Muslims

⁶⁶ Romans 4:11; John 8:37-44

⁶⁷ Galatians 3:10; James 2:10

⁶⁸ John 7:19,22

⁶⁹ John 7:19-24

⁷⁰ Acts 15:1

by keeping the law, then they were obligated to keep the whole law of works perfectly⁷¹! Paul also taught that no one keeps or is able to keep the whole law of God without breaking one law in his life. Therefore God would not justify any person on the basis of keeping the law (3:19-20,28)!

It is obvious that the Jews in the New Testament time regarded physical circumcision as a means that in some way secured their justification or salvation. They taught, “Unless you are (physical) circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved”. Other Jewish rabbis taught that “no (physical) circumcised man will see hell”. And they alleged that “God swore to Abraham, that no one, who was (physical) circumcised, should be sent to hell”.

They told everyone that “Abraham sits before the gate of hell and does not allow any (physical) circumcised Israelite to enter there.” *Thus, physical circumcision in fact became the physical outward sign of Jewish nationalism!* This teaching of the Jewish rabbis is certainly not based on the facts of the Bible and must be rejected.

Fake Jews and worthless physical circumcision. The word ‘Jew’⁷² is derived from the tribe of Judah⁷³ and is probably derived from the word ‘to praise’⁷⁴. A real Jew desires to receive his praise from God, while a fake Jew desires to receive his praise from people. Jesus condemned the Jews, because they relied on outward appearance and were always seeking praise from one another⁷⁵. Paul regards a mere outward physical Jew as a fake Jew. Natural descent from Jacob does not make a descendant of Jacob a real Jew in God’s eyes!

In the time of the New Testament physical circumcision was no longer a sign of the covenant of grace, but had become a custom based on the Old Testament ceremonial law⁷⁶. However, the outward sign of physical circumcision has no value without the spiritual circumcision of the heart!

Genuine Jews and the real spiritual circumcision. A genuine ‘Jew’, that is, a genuine believer that receives praise from God, is not characterised by what he is outwardly and physically, but what he is inwardly and spiritually! The only genuine ‘Jew’ is a person whose heart has been circumcised by the Holy Spirit. ‘Circumcision of the heart’ means to be born again through the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart. This principle, negatively stated, is that whoever is not spiritually circumcised will never receive praise, approval or recognition from God (2:28)! This principle, positively stated, is that whoever is spiritually circumcised in the heart through the work of the Holy Spirit in the inward man will receive praise, approval and recognition from God! Thus, the only genuine ‘Jew’ (a person approved by God) is a Christian, no matter whether he was originally a natural Jew or a natural Gentile! Only such a person receives praise from God! Fake Jews receive their praise from other people (Jews), but genuine ‘Jews’ receive their praise from God.

The prophet Jeremiah already exhorted the Jews not to boast in human wisdom, strength and riches, but in knowing God. God will punish the nations (like Egypt, Judah and Ammon) that are only circumcised in the flesh (body) and not circumcised in heart⁷⁷. The apostle warned against religious teachers and leaders who enforce physical circumcision on people. They are called ‘mutilators of the flesh’⁷⁸. Only people who worship God in the Spirit, who glory in Christ Jesus and who put no confidence in (the circumcision of) the flesh are the true circumcision (the genuine spiritually born again people).

The New Testament clearly teaches that physical circumcision as a part of the ceremonial law⁷⁹ has been *fulfilled* by the death of Christ and the solidarity of believers with the death of Christ⁸⁰. Physical circumcision has consequently been *cancelled*⁸¹ and *abrogated*⁸². “In Christ Jesus, neither (physical) circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love”⁸³. “Neither (physical) circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything anymore; what counts is being a new creation” through justification by faith and rebirth by the Holy Spirit. All people who follow this rule are really *the people of God* and are called *the Israel of God*⁸⁴!

⁷¹ Galatians 5:1-4

⁷² H: Jehudi or Judi

⁷³ H: Jehudah

⁷⁴ H: hodah. Genesis 29:35; 49:8

⁷⁵ John 5:44

⁷⁶ John 7:22

⁷⁷ Jeremiah 9:23-26

⁷⁸ Philippians 3:2-3

⁷⁹ Leviticus 12:3

⁸⁰ Colossians 2:11-12

⁸¹ Colossians 2:14

⁸² Ephesians 2:15

⁸³ Galatians 5:6

⁸⁴ Galatians 6:15-16; cf. 2 Corinthians 6:16