



Look to the Heart

Romans 2:25-29

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This morning we will be looking at the last few verses in the book of Romans, chapter 2, verses 25-29. May the Lord give us insight into his Word. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely without error, the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative, and the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient. Romans, chapter 2, beginning at verse 25:

"For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. 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."

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. O Lord our God, we ask that you would open up your Word to us, and more than that, that you would cause it to take deep root in our hearts, that by the power of your Holy Spirit we would be transformed more and more into the image of our great Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

We come now to the conclusion of the second chapter in Paul's great letter to the Romans. Paul has been showing us in the beginning of this book to the Romans that his main aim is to point out to all of us our need for the gospel. Later on, Paul will describe what the gospel is and what it provides for us, but now he is addressing everyone he can to make them aware of their need for the gospel.

The problem is that we people want to show Paul why we don't need his gospel. "Thank you very much, Paul. We don't really need that right now." There are some who are sure they are right with God. They have assurance, but assurance isn't always good. There is a good assurance that comes from trusting in the perfect work of Christ, but there is a bad assurance that comes from trusting in anything else.

This morning I would like us to see two things from our text. First, a *false security*, what it means to trust in something that's false and cannot save. Then secondly, *real righteousness*, what righteousness before God is that is real and true. False security and real righteousness. Let's begin, then, by looking at *false security* in chapter 2, verse 25. Paul opens this section of his argument, "For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision."

A False Security

We might ask ourselves, "Why are people arguing against Paul? Why are they continually trying to posit that they don't need the gospel, and how are they doing this?" We've seen this throughout this chapter. First, there are people who say, "Look, Pastor, look at everybody around me. You can see how bad they are. Can't you see I'm not like them, that I don't do the things they do? I don't need the gospel."

Then there are others who might say, "Surely God will take it easy on me. It's not like I'm one of these people who's hostile to God and to his church. I'm not picking a fight with God. He'll take it easy on me. I don't need the gospel." A third category Paul has talked about is those who say, "I know the law. I could tell you what's right and wrong. I'm on God's side. I'm pointing out who's right and who's wrong. I don't need the gospel."

Then we also saw the statement that went something like this: "I'm one of the good guys. God needs me. I'm one of the people who spreads the Judeo-Christian ethic throughout our land. Why would I need the gospel? God needs me." Now here this morning we come to what some commentators call the *last retreat of the Jew* or the *last retreat of the religious person*.

Imagine a fortress in which there is a huge outer wall and then an inner wall and then a castle, and within the castle there is a stormproof room. That's where the religious people of Paul's day are retreating to. They may say, "Well, Paul, you may be right in all of these other cases, but I have an ironclad guarantee that I don't need the gospel. Let me tell you what it is."

We've been imagining all along Paul talking with someone. You remember how over and over again Paul anticipates the arguments people will bring to his statements. In this chapter he has been dealing with people who keep offering up excuses why they don't need the gospel. Now Paul is dealing with the hardest gospel cases.

There are people who know they're not right with God, people who feel they are under judgment and are anxious because of it. Those people are not hard gospel cases. There are other people who are sure they are right with God, and the latter are the harder cases: those who know there is a gospel and at the same time are sure they do not need it.

The latest excuse now is circumcision. We might imagine Paul's interlocutor saying to him, "Paul, I can show you I don't need the gospel. I have a mark on my body that shows I am a part of the people of God. We don't need to think about this. We don't need to ask about what's going on. I have full proof, empirical proof that I don't need the gospel. I have circumcision."

The question then comes... *What is circumcision?* This is an important question for us because it will help you and me to see how this passage applies to us. Circumcision was the sign of God's covenant and his promise to

Abraham. God had called Abraham out of his country, away from his family, and he did so by giving to Abraham a promise.

In Genesis, chapter 12, God tells Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." But now in order to seal that promise, to make it sure, God gives Abraham a sign, a very real sign of his promise. He gives him circumcision. It was this way that Abraham and his descendants could visibly see the difference between them and the rest of the world, that God had called them apart.

So the religious person of the day, the Jew of the day, would say, "Paul, I already have the promise. I already have inherited the covenant. Just look at me. I have the sign of the covenant upon me. I'm visibly set apart from the world." The idea was that God had set them apart and that because of that they were God's. This is what made all the difference for them. Circumcision is what made a Jew a Jew, and the Jews relied on it.

We know from the rabbinical writings that they trusted in their circumcision. Writings like this: "Our rabbis have said that no circumcised man will go to hell." Or this: "Circumcision saves from hell." Or this: "God swore to Abraham that no one who was circumcised should be sent to hell." There was actually a rabbinical teaching that Abraham's job in the afterlife was to sit at the gates of hell, and whenever anyone approached the gates of hell who was circumcised Abraham was to say, "Stop! You can't come here. You're circumcised. You must go back to heaven."

That's how much they relied on this sign of the covenant. The question then comes to you and me...*How does this apply to us?* We don't have circumcision as an entrance into the covenant, but do we have something like it? Well, what we have to do is ask ourselves the question...*What happens when you are asked, "Are you a believer?"*

In America, perhaps the most common answer to that is, "Well, I walked the aisle a few years ago," or perhaps someone might say, "I've been baptized," or someone might say, "Listen. I'm a member of a church. No, wait. I'm a long-time member of a church," or that statement of all statements: "I'm a charter member of a church. Why are you asking me if I'm a believer?"

Notice what all of these things have in common. They're all in the past tense. It's nothing about who the person is now. The other thing is they're all outward. They're all quantifiable. This is very appealing to people because it requires less of us. We can show our covenant mark of membership, and then we're done. No thinking about a relationship with God. No cultivating the love of God or his Word. We're simply done.

It's kind of like the way our team returned from Peru. They didn't ask them if they were good Americans. They didn't ask them if they voted, if they paid their taxes. They just said, "Show me your passport." Once they see your passport... "Okay, that's enough." You're in. Easy, objective, good to go. The question then

comes to you...*How would you answer that question?* Are you a believer? Why would you answer it the way you do? What is your assurance based on?

You see, Paul is pointing out that the religious people of his day were resting in a sign. They were taking false security from the sign of the covenant. Now, we have to be careful to see what Paul is *not* saying. He's not saying circumcision is bad. He's not even saying it has no value. Circumcision *did* have value. Otherwise God wouldn't have given it. But the thing is it was a sign, not the substance.

So if we extrapolate it for you and me, we're not saying baptism is bad. I just performed a baptism. We're not saying church membership is bad. I hope you commit to God's people. But by definition, the sign is not the substance. It's a sign. It would be like this. If we were to get in the car together and go drive east on I-10, eventually we would come up to a sign that says, "This is Beaumont."

Now let me ask you a question. Is the sign Beaumont? Can the sign feed you dinner? Can the sign rent you a hotel to stay in? No, of course not. So does that mean the sign is worthless? Well, not if you're trying to get to Beaumont, because you want to know where Beaumont is, and the sign says it's here. But it's not the substance; it's a sign.

Another way to think about it in the context of a relationship is this. Circumcision was like a wedding ring. A wedding ring is not a marriage, is it? A wedding ring doesn't even *make* a marriage. You don't know whether I love my wife or treat her well by the wedding ring, the type of ring I wear. The substance of the relationship bears that out. Yet at the same time wedding rings aren't worthless, are they? They're things we treasure. They're things we enjoy. They're things that are signs of our relationship and our marriage.

As a matter of fact, if you're anything like me and you have nervous habits of taking your wedding ring off and tossing it in the air or spinning it on a table, your wife will tell you very quickly that it has value. "Put that on your finger now. Do not lose it." Not because if I lost the wedding ring I suddenly wouldn't be married anymore, but the ring has value as a sign pointing to the relationship.

That's how we need to think about circumcision. That's how we need to think about baptism. They're important because they point us to the reality. That's what circumcision was for. It's a sign of God's covenant promise. What does God promise to do? God promises to change us. God's promise takes us from death to life. God's promise gives us a new heart that beats with a love for God and a love for his Word. This is what Paul is saying in verse 25.

He's saying circumcision is of value if you keep the law, if you obey the law, but if you break the law your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. You are saying that the sign is not true to the reality of who you are. Now, Paul is not saying here that circumcision is only valuable if you can perfectly keep the law for salvation. This is what the religious people of the day thought.

When they realized they couldn't keep the law perfectly, what they began to do was to lessen the law, to say things like, "Well, of course 'You shall not steal' applies to me breaking into my neighbor's house, but I'm not sure it really applies to me leaving work early and taking money from my employer. I'm sure it applies to me stealing from someone, but I don't think it really applies if I just borrow something and forget conveniently to give it back. It's not the same."

What they did was they changed the law so they could obey it. But the sign is more. It points us to the reality of who we are. We need to go beyond the outward. This has been the great controversy over the last half decade with what has been called the *Federal Vision Theology*. If you don't know what the Federal Vision is, I can tell you in very short terms. It is something that has arisen out of Reformed theology that when someone is asked if they're a believer they're taught to ask two questions.

First, "Have I been baptized? Yes." Secondly, "Have I been disciplined and thrown out of the church? No." Well, then you're good before God. Nothing about faith in Christ. Nothing about a life of prayer. Nothing about seeking sanctification. Just the covenant sign and I haven't lost covenant membership. That's what the religious people of not only Paul's day but of our day want. They want an easy track.

The problem is circumcision was not a sign of the law or of keeping God's works. Circumcision was a sign of the covenant of grace. It was a sign of God's gracious promise to Abraham. So when Paul says here, "For circumcision is indeed of value if you obey the law," he doesn't have in mind perfect obedience that would merit justification by God. If he does we're all lost.

What he means is that the tenor of your life has to be in accord with God's Word. If you are not living in accordance with God's Word, then the profession you have made is not a true profession. If you are not living to honor and glorify God, you can't rely on just the sign to get you into God's good graces. The covenant sign is a sign of drastic change from life to death.

Way back in the Old Testament God told us this in Jeremiah 31. "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days...I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people." Notice what it means to be a part of God's covenant people. It's to have the law of God written on your heart.

The lack of a substance in our lives shows that there is no value to the sign. If you break the law, it's as if you never had the sign of the promise, because you're not showing the fruit of the promise. To receive the promise means to follow after God's ways. Not perfectly, but by God's grace and the work of the Holy Spirit it is to become daily more and more like Jesus Christ. If someone is living the fruit of the promise, even if he doesn't have the sign he still does have the reality. He hasn't lost it.

We see at least one ironclad example of this in the Scriptures. We see it in the thief on the cross. He's on the cross next to our Lord Jesus dying, and he professes faith in Christ, that he is the King. Jesus says to him, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus doesn't say, "I'm sorry. That's a really good profession, and if we had about another hour or two we could get you baptized, and then you'd really be in heaven, but I'm sorry. They don't do baptisms on crosses these days."

Think about how ridiculous that sounds. That's what Paul is saying. If someone is uncircumcised, if someone is unbaptized, yet they have the substance and live in accordance with God's Word, then they make your circumcision or your baptism, you who do not follow God, look false and of no effect. The Lord is continually warning us in his Word to look for our assurance in Christ.

Are you trusting Jesus today? Can you see how Jesus is changing your life today? Are you living for Jesus today? *That* is what is real. Now it's not that baptism or membership is unimportant, but these things should point us to Christ and to his benefits.

Real Righteousness

Next Paul shows us what *real righteousness* is. He doesn't want us to settle for an outward show of righteousness. If you think about it, Paul is simply following Jesus' steps here, because a great deal of Jesus' ministry was to tell religious people not to settle for what they thought was the bare minimum that would get them into heaven.

The Pharisees were the best example of this, not the *only* example of this. Part of our problem is when we look at the Pharisees we're so busy explaining how wrong they were we fail to see how we might fall into the same types of errors. Paul says in verse 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."

What Paul says here is, "It's great that you have circumcision. It's great that you have the written law of God. These are blessings, but with blessings come responsibility." Paul says if you really have those things you will not ignore the reality they represent, and if you ignore the reality they represent you will be judged by those who have the reality.

Now why is that? I thought Christianity was supposed to be about grace. It's not about works, is it? It *is* about grace. Grace is real. Grace is not just a word. Grace changes. Grace is all about making you a new person, not just cleaning you up on the outside so you can be presentable before others. Actually, very few people object to being made presentable. So few people do that those who do we think are weird. We don't understand why they don't want to be presentable.

We are very willing to be respected and respectable, and a great many Americans today especially are glad to be thought of as being on God's side, but there's a catch. I want to be on God's side, but I don't want to

change my life. I don't want to live as if God is real. I don't want to live as if God matters. I don't want to live as if what God says in his Word is true.

Paul zeroes in on this in verse 28. He says, "No one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical." He's saying that no one is a Jew just because of the outward nature of things. He actually says no one is a Jew because of circumcision. This is dynamite, absolute dynamite in the room, because he's completely undoing the concept of what it means to be a Jew, and Jewishness means being right with God.

It's not a matter of the outward sign, Paul says. It's not a matter of your race. Instead, it is only the reality that matters. Paul uses two phrases to make this clear. He says that circumcision is not physical. Now how can this be? The Greek actually says circumcision is not in the flesh. Last time I looked, that's all circumcision wants. It's the cutting away of the flesh. How can Paul say that? The point Paul is making is it's not what I put on display or that someone can see that matters; it's the heart.

That's why God constantly told Israel not to be stiff-necked, not to trust in their physical circumcision but to instead circumcise their hearts. A second phrase Paul uses here is that a person's relationship with God is not outwardly. The word there in the Greek is *manifest*. We might better think about it this way: for show. It's not done just for show. You know what that's like, don't you?

It's summer in Texas. Kids, do you ever go to the pool in summer in Texas? Of course you do. Right? Mom or Dad takes you to the pool and you get to swim and Mom or Dad gets to relax and read a book. Right? No way. Why? Because about every 30 seconds... "Mom, Mom, look at me! Dad, Dad, look at me! I can be upside down under the water. Mom, Mom, look at me! I can jump and I can even hold my nose under water. Look at this! Look at that! Look at me!" It's all for show.

It's not enough that you do it. People have to see you do it. Now it's one thing if you're playing games in the pool. It's another thing if that's how you're trying to live your life. "Oh look at me, look at me! Look what I do. I give to charity. Oh look at me, look at me, look at me! I go to church. Oh look at me, look at me! I have a Bible. Let's pray now so everyone can see me. Look at me, look at me!"

Paul says that "for show," that outward nature is not what builds a relationship with God. We're not supposed to settle for these sorts of things. Well, what do we do then? What we do here is we have to understand we need to look to the substance. You may say, "Well, listen, Pastor. I am here in church this morning, and I'm baptized. I'm even a member. Hey, I even give. Come on. I'm doing all of that in a culture that hates God and hates the church. Doesn't that show enough devotion? Isn't that enough?"

Brothers and sisters, I have to tell you God's answer is "No." It's not enough to settle for outward righteousness before people. Again, to repeat. It's not as if Paul is saying, "Run away from the covenant sign. Don't get

baptized. Don't join a church. Don't give." That's not what Paul is saying. What he's saying is you can't stop there. It's not enough to stop at the exterior.

We think we can easily identify with God's people. "Look! Look! He's baptized. Look! Look! She's a member." The truth is that's just the first step. Paul says a real Jew is one inwardly. By *Jew* here Paul doesn't mean ethnicity or even a practitioner of Judaism. He can't mean that because neither of those things are inward. What he means is a child of God.

A true child of God is one inwardly, a matter of the heart, one who has received the covenant promises and the grace of God. This happens not in the sacrament, not on a church roll, but in the heart. It's what Peter called the "hidden person of the heart that is precious before God." Paul calls it "in the secret," inside. This is the real circumcision, the real sign we must cultivate.

It is circumcision of the heart, and it doesn't come by the letter, merely following the rules; it comes by the work of the Spirit...the Spirit who works where he wills, how he wills, bringing life where there was none. The Spirit applies the work of Jesus Christ to the believer. When you believe on Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit has already begun a work in you. Your faith is evidence of that. You would not have faith but for the work of the Spirit (Ephesians 2).

The Spirit is doing the work God is calling you to: heart work. The focus you should have should be on the inner (the reality) not the outward (the show). Deuteronomy 30 puts it this way: "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." This is what it means to be a real follower of Jesus.

Paul ends on an interesting note. He says the one who is focused on the heart... "His praise is not from man but from God." He's saying the true Jew, the true follower of God, is the one who desires a real relationship with God, and his praise is from God, not from man. Paul is making a bit of a pun here. I realize anytime you have to explain a pun you're in trouble. When you have to explain a Hebrew pun through Greek in English you're in big trouble. So track with me.

The word for *Jew* comes from the name Judah. They were descendants of Judah. That's what a Jew is. Do you know what the name Judah means? When Judah was born, his mother proclaimed, "His name will be Judah, for I will praise the Lord." *Judah* means "I will praise" in Hebrew.

You see, what Paul is saying here is that the one who is a true Jew, the one who is the recipient of praise, who is praised for being a child of God has praise that comes from God, not from man. You must rely on God and on *his* judgment, not on the judgment of men. May you rely today on the Lord Jesus Christ and his work. He is the one who works on the heart.