



SCRIPTURE STUDIES: ROMANS 2:17-29

Brandon Sutton, Associate Pastor of The Journey Church in Lebanon, TN

Romans 2:17-29 (ESV) -- But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God and know His will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth - you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." 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.

When I pastored in Indiana, our church was a part of the Christian Union denomination. Christian Union started back in the Civil War era in response to the politicization of the Christian pulpit. Preachers filled their sermons with partisan rhetoric and opinions on the war, and many faithful believers grew tired of not hearing the word. So, Christians from various denominations left their churches to form the Christian Union. The idea was to have a denomination free from political agendas and focused on the essentials of the Christian faith, particularly the Great Commission. Like so many churches and denominations before them, they began with the right intentions, but over time, the Christian Union denomination has declined and fell into what can only be described as

spiritual lethargy. Really, it's disobedience. When I took my pastorate in 2013, there were 113 Christian Union churches nationwide. By the time I left in 2021, around 80 remained. The rest either closed or left the denomination.

Despite the decline, however, the denomination and most of the churches maintained a semblance of outward faithfulness. The churches still met for worship. They still gave towards mission's efforts. Kid's camps and ministries were still a focus. Bible studies were still conducted. All the outward forms of religion are still there, but there was a clear spiritual deadness to it all.

Charles Hodge wrote, "Whenever true religion declines, the disposition to lay undo stress on external rites is stressed. The Jews when they lost their spirituality supposed that circumcision had the power to save them." To that point, John MacArthur said, "Apostasy always moves the religious focus from the inward to the outward, from humble obedience to empty formality."

This is a perfect description to the Judaism of Paul's day. It was a false, apostate religion that relied on its traditions, heritage, and outward forms religion for salvation. All the while they lacked obedience and true saving faith.

Our passage tonight is a great reminder for us to not only avoid getting stuck in the outward forms of religion but also that we shouldn't place our confidence in these external things as well. Instead of putting our hope in our religious traditions, beliefs and practices, we should place our hope in Christ alone.

Scriptural Context

- **Overview of Ch.2.** The previous verses focused on God's impartial judgment of all mankind, but in verses 17-29, Paul explicitly condemns the Jews. He makes it clear that they cannot escape the arguments made in verse 1-16. He also makes it clear that just because they have the law and circumcision, they will not be justified in God's sight. Rather, it is the doers of the law who will be justified. Mere possession of the law and circumcision will not save them.
- **Summary 2:17-29.** The Jews relied on their heritage as Jews for justification before God. They had the law and Yahweh as their God, they were educated in the law of God, they led others in the ways of God.

Point #1-The Jews had Every Spiritual Advantage

Romans 2:17-20 (ESV) -- But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God and know His will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth

The following are all positive advantages, but they have become false securities because the Jews did not keep the law.

Advantage #1-Religious Tradition (V.17)

- **Explanation.** In the previous verses, Paul was speaking to Jews and Gentiles (V.1-16), but here, he is specifically and directly speaking to Jews (c.f. V.29). The Jews relied on being possessors of the law and having Yahweh as their God. They were the covenant people. But it all meant nothing since they were law breakers. Being a Jew was an advantage (Romans 3:1-3), but all of those advantages are null and void if you break the law.
- **Call yourself a Jew.** They relied on and prided themselves in being a Jew (from the term Judah, a name that represented their religious and ethnic heritage) for their justification. They were ethnic descendants from Abraham and believed that was sufficient for righteousness. But what did John the Baptist say? ***“Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.”*** (Matthew 3:9).
- **Rely on the law.** It is a blessing to have had received God’s law. His law is a gift (7:12). It blesses the soul (Psalm 19:7-11). And the Jews knew that if they kept the law, they’d be blessed and if they broke the law, they’d be cursed. Their problem was they relied upon the law they continually broke to justify them. They just didn’t understand the high bar of God’s holiness.
- **Boast in God.** Paul means this positively. They prided themselves that Yahweh was their God. All of these positive—being a Jew, law recipients, and boasters in God. They’re all advantages. The problem is that they break the law of the God they boast in.
- **Illustration/Application:** We cannot rely on our religious heritage for justification before God. I once purchased a car from a Chevy dealership. The finance man needed to know what I did for a living. Of course, I told him I was a pastor. He said, “Oh that’s cool.” I then asked him if he attended church (why else would he say being a pastor is cool?). He responded very forcefully by saying, “My

grandparents built the Catholic Church here in town." I said, "Oh, that's nice!" This man was clearly banking his hopes in his rich religious heritage. We cannot do that. To do so, means spiritual bankruptcy.

Advantage #2-Bible Knowledge (V.18)

- **Explanation.** **The Jews know the will of God and what God approves, because they are instructed in the law of God (39 books of the OT).** Paul told the **Ephesians**, "try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord." (5:10). **The Jews had discerned what pleases the Lord because of their insight into the law of God.** "As John MacArthur noted, "This Law encompassed all of God's revelation until that time: His revelation about His covenants, His blessings, His cursings, His warnings, His promises, His rites and ceremonies, His moral standards, and His teaching about Himself and about man and the plan of redemption." The Jews had incredible Bible knowledge.
- **Incomplete Bible knowledge.** **Their Bible knowledge was valuable and important, but it was incomplete.** They believed that God was pleased with them having mere facts of the law. But what they failed to do was obey the law they knew so well. Furthermore, they missed the Savior. You can know the Bible, but if you miss trusting the Savior, you have missed the whole point of Scripture, and this is exactly what they had done. **Jesus scolded the Jews of His day by saying,** "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39-40).

Advantage #3-Gospel Preachers (V.19)

- **Explanation.** This refers to the ministry the Jews had to the Gentiles. They were to open the eyes of the blind (Isa. 42:7). The Jews were confident that they were able to lead lost people to the light of salvation, which means they themselves believed they were saved. This is not evangelism as we know it today. This is stating that the Jews had the law and Gentiles would flock to Jerusalem to hear God's Word and worship Yahweh (Isa. 2:1-4).
- **Jesus' indictments.** Jesus called the Pharisees blind guides (Matthew 23:24-28). He said the Pharisees traveled long distances to make converts, but they were twice the sons of hell as them.
- **Application.** We must be people who practice what we preach. If we're going to call others to repentance and faith, we must be exemplifying godliness and living holy lives.

- **Illustration.** I just heard this week that one of my seminary professors, a man who spent his life on the mission field and teaching students about the Great Commission, was involved in an inappropriate relationship with a student for more than ten years. He instructed foreigners in the ways of Christ, even in his moral teachings, yet he himself was involved in immorality. That's hypocrisy.

Advantage #4-Bible Teachers (V.20)

- **Explanation.** The Jews were Bible teachers. They taught the ignorant (probably Jews and Gentiles) and children in the law of God. They themselves had the knowledge and truth of God.
- **A corrupted word.** The Jews had the Bible, but through their legalistic systems, they had corrupted God's pure, divine word.
- **Illustration.** I went out to GCC in California in 2020 to hear John MacArthur preach in his own church. During that time the city of Los Angeles wanted GCC shut down, but they refused. So, they did what they could to stifle their services. One tactic was taking away a parking lot GCC rented from the city for 40 years. But that didn't stop them, because GCC leaders asked a nearby synagogue if they could use their parking lot on Sunday mornings and the Jewish leaders allowed it. That Sunday I was there, MacArthur was preaching on the corrupt, legalist system the Jews had developed. They created so many laws and traditions of their own around God's word, that even though they were teachers, they had lost sight of the truth. J Mac was emphasizing their need for the Savior. It just so happened that on that very morning one of the Jewish Rabbis was present listening to that message.
- **Application.** We cannot rely on the fact we are Bible teachers. We must be doers of the word. We must be people who trust in the God we preach. We cannot instruct others and fail to instruct ourselves.

Point #2-The Jews did not Practice What They Preached

Romans 2:21-22 (ESV) -- you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

- Paul's argument shifts gears in verses 21-24. In verses 19-23, he states all of the positive advantages the Jews received. But all of advantages are null and void because they are law breakers (V.21-24).
- Paul asks four rhetorical questions in verses 21-22, and then he concludes his point in verses 23-24.

(V.21a) -- you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself?

- **Explanation.** This functions as the main rhetorical question. Essentially, Paul is saying don't you practice what you preach?! You teach others the law of God (which is a good thing), but you don't teach yourself?! By teach yourself, he doesn't mean they are void of the knowledge of the law, but that they don't obey it. And by not obeying the law, they show they don't fully understand the law. They are hypocrites.
- **Jesus' indictment.** "Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ² "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, ³ so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice." (Matthew 23:1-3).

The following three questions are commandments derived from the Decalogue. The Ten Commandments condemn theft, adultery, and idolatry. The Jews taught against these things but committed these sins in practice.

(V.21b) -- While you preach against stealing, do you steal?

- **Explanation.** Though they taught that God condemned theft, many Jews were thieves. The prophets constantly rebuked the covenant people for taking advantage of others for unjust gain (Isa. 56:11). The leaders took bribes. The people robbed God by withholding their tithes. When Jesus cleansed the Temple, His primary indictment was that they turned the house of God into a den of thieves. He also condemned the Pharisees for devouring widows.
- **Illustration:** The man who was responsible for bringing my parents to faith, a Presbyterian pastor named Tom, disqualified from the ministry. For one, he was caught multiple times look at pornography on his church computer. But when he left, it was discovered, he swindled an old woman out of her money. He was a thief.

(V.22a) -- You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?

- **Explanation.** Though they taught biblical marriage and that God hates adultery, they committed adultery. Many Jewish men found a loophole around the prohibition against adultery. They would divorce their wives for just about any reason and take another woman they were attracted to. Jesus said divorce and remarriage for any reason besides infidelity is adultery.

(V.22b) -- You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

- **Explanation.** This question is disputed as to its meaning. Since the previous two indictments are literal, it is best to interpret this literal too. I don't believe he is talking about the temple in Jerusalem because he mentions idols. So, this must be pagan temples. Plundering pagan temples and profiting from their goods was considered idolatry to the Jews. Furthermore, it is an overall inconsistency to say you hate idols but all the while you're profiting from taking the goods within pagan temples. It's hypocrisy, which fits this whole section.
- **OT Prohibition.** Deuteronomy 7:25, ***"The carved images of their gods you shall burn with fire. You shall not covet the silver or the gold that is on them or take it for yourselves, lest you be ensnared by it, for it is an abomination to the LORD your God."***

Conclusion (V.21-22)

- Is Paul saying that every Jew stole, committed adultery and robbed pagan temples? Probably not. These rhetorical questions meant to drive home a bigger principle—the Jews didn't practice what they preached!

Transition: We now conclude the section (17-24); the Jews are lawbreakers. That's the main point Paul wants to make.

Point #3-The Jews were Lawbreakers

Romans 2:23-24 (ESV) -- You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

(V.23) -- You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.

- **Explanation.** This is the main point. They boast in being the recipients and teachers of the law of God, but they don't keep the law they've been given. Boasting in the law of God is not wrong. It's wrong to boast in it if you don't keep it. Therefore, they are no different than the Gentiles. In fact, they're worse. The Gentiles failed to glorify God and give Him thanks (1:21). The Jews failed to keep God's law.

(V.24) -- For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

- **Explanation.** The text quoted here is most likely Isaiah 52:5, which is set in the context of exile. The pagans blasphemed God because of the Jews. The Jews in Paul's day were no different. They were under the oppression of Rome just as Isaiah's contemporaries were under the Assyrians.

Advantage #5-Ritual Observers (V.25-29)

Romans 2:25-29 (ESV) -- 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.

(V.25) -- For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision

- **Explanation.** "For" does not seem to ground verse 24, as the word for usually does. For can mean "for example." Illustration: I am tired "for" my bed looks mighty enticing. The enticement of my bed is not the cause of my fatigue. Lack of sleep is (or whatever). The bed's enticement is proof or an example of my tiredness. Therefore, Paul seems to be saying, for example, circumcision is of no value if you don't obey the law, only if you keep the law. Otherwise, you might as well be uncircumcised. The Jews believed their circumcision, among other spiritual advantages, benefited them ("value") in terms of justification. And it would if they didn't break the law.

- **Perfect obedience.** The point Paul is making here and throughout is that if you subscribe the law and circumcision, you must obey the whole law. Now, that the New Covenant has come, if you want to live under the old covenant, you must adhere to the whole law.

(V. 26) -- So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?

- **Explanation.** If a Gentile keeps the law, he is considered part of God's people more than the Jew who is circumcised yet a law breaker. This is a devastating statement to the Jews. It tears down their self-righteousness.

(V.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.

- **Explanation.** The Gentiles who keep the law, even though they aren't circumcised, will judge the Jew who is circumcised for his law breaking. I don't think Paul is literal here. He's saying that the Gentile who keeps God's law will be used a rebuke to unfaithful Jews. This was another devastating blow to Jewish pride.

(V.28) -- For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.

- **Explanation.** God is not impressed nor only looking at outward conformity to the law. He is looking at the heart. Just because you adhere to the outwards forms of religion doesn't make you a Christian. What does? Verse 29.

(V.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.

- **Explanation.** God is looking at the heart. Here circumcision refers to the new birth. Your heart has been made new by the Holy Spirit, not by the law.