

Sin's Jewish Condemnation

Romans 2:17-3:8³

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All is not well with the world. God's wrath is being stored up to be poured out. The prior passages in Romans have indicted the long history of depraved wickedness. Our author has also condemned the false security of morally good but unbelieving people.



But the moral pagan were not the only legalists. Legalism is attractive to many. It gives them a sense of accomplishment. It gives them an external standard to measure themselves by. So, many are thinking, "If I am meeting the standard then I am ok. God is pleased with me because, really, I am pleased with myself."

Judaism had become mostly legalistic. Most Jews were simply unbelievers. The Old Testament history is full of the rebellion, sin and apostasy of Israel. Yet, after the exile, there rose a group of religious Jews who taught that being circumcised and keeping the Law would guarantee a Jew entrance into paradise.

This is what Jesus confronted in His ministry here on earth. He was confronted with and regularly was condemning religious legalists. Paul was dealing with it too.

So, the powerful progression of this indictment now moves against the religionist, the Jew who relied in his good works and law keeping.

Who Defame the Honor of God (v.17-24)

Jewish pride has led to disgrace, condemnation and punishment.

¹⁷ But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God ¹⁸ and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; ¹⁹ and if you are sure 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 children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— ²¹ you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? ²² You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who boast in the law dishonor God by

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breaking the law. ²⁴ For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

Their Proudful Boasting (v. 17-20)

This was how the Jew thought of himself. Paul knows this very well himself. The Pharisees and the Jewish Rabbis saw themselves in these elevated, lofty terms. Were these true? Were these what God intended Israel to be and do? Yes. This was a part of who they were. This was part of their mission in the world.

God had given them their identity and made them His nation, His people. They had a relationship with God. He had also given them His Word, His will, His Law. They had a relationship and they had a responsibility. They in turn boasted in God. They thought that they were approving what God required. They lived as a privileged people. They saw themselves the hope of the world. Because they had been taught the Law, they could lead the blind and give light in the dark world. They could teach the ignorant and simple Gentiles and instruct the foolish. In the right way, that is what God intended. God set them as a nation to be a light, to lead the blind and to instruct the wicked.

They had in the Law all the embodiment of knowledge and truth. These three terms in the prophetic books were applied to the coming Messiah. He would lead the blind. He would be the light of the world. He would instruct the Gentiles in the ways of God. He would be their hope.

But they had turned their relationship with God and their responsibility to the world into a source of pride. The privileges that God gave them became a means of boasting. Instead of ministering to the Gentile world, they began looking down on the Gentiles, condemning them for the vileness and evilness. And sadly, they also missed the Messiah in His coming. They may have known the Law, but they failed to recognize the one who came to fulfill the Law.

Their Evident Hypocrisy (v. 21-22)

Paul calls out their hypocrisy. Just like the Gentile moralist was self-condemned because of judging others, the self-righteous and proud Jew was condemned. They were doing the very things they condemned the Gentiles for doing. They could denounce their stealing. They could preach against the world's sexual sins. They could damn the idolatry that pervaded the life and religion of the world. But they had become, it seems, no better than the Gentiles. They were violating the very things they taught and condemned in others. They were stealing, committing adultery and robbing pagan temples to have their own idols.

Their Dreadful Scandal (v. 23-24)

This dreadful scandal brought shame upon themselves. Even worse, it brought God's name into disrepute. Instead of being a witness to the holiness, the goodness, the glory of God, they had discredited God in the eyes of the Gentiles. The Gentiles, instead of believing in and bowing to God, blasphemed Him on account of the Jews.

What a terrible thing! Yet too often the church has done exactly the same thing. We have the Scriptures. We have well taught leaders. We have some level of voice in our world. Yet we are often caught doing the very things that our salvation is supposed to have saved us from. The church has often given the world reason to decry the faith, denounce Christians and deny God.

Here they are with all their privileges and pride. For all their light, they do not illuminate God. Instead, they have obscured Him. The inconsistency between what they know, what they proclaim and how they live all serve to dishonor God. In the end, the Gentiles blaspheme instead of bowing to God.

The powerful indictment of the Jews and all religionists turns on verse 23. Those who boast in having the Scripture and who break the Scripture, dishonor God. We who say we love God's Word must be careful to live God's Word unless we turn people away from God and His Word.

Who Focus on Externals

(v.25-29)

The problem with the Law is that it tended to focus on the externals.

²⁵ For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. ²⁶ So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? 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. ²⁸ For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. 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.

Circumcision's Relation to the Law (v. 25-27)

Remember that circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant. It maintained the lineage and inheritance through sons to Jesus. Circumcision was enforced by the Law. The sign of the Mosaic Law was the Sabbath. So, circumcision was ethnic as far as being a Jew while Sabbath keeping was national as far as being a part of Israel.

Paul's questions here, though not simple, do expose a simple problem. Jews thought of themselves as having a permanent relation with God through circumcision whether they closely kept the Mosaic Law or not. But Paul seems to be indicating that breaking Law actually uncircumcised a Jew. Certainly, under the New Covenant, circumcision and Law keeping had nothing to do with being a Christian. And a person claiming to be an ethnic Jew who consistently broke the Law was in fact denying his Jewishness.

Paul elevates the problem with verse 27. The man who is keeping the Law but is uncircumcised condemns the Jew. We have little sense of the shock value this would have had on the ordinary Jewish person of Paul's day. The Gentile keeping the Law condemned the circumcised Jew who broke the Law.

Circumcision's Limitation for the Jew (v. 28)

No one is a true Jew who merely has the outward sign in his body. Now again, we have a hard time identifying with the stunning reversal of Jewish thinking. Even in the church, the Judaizers were saying that one was not a true Christian unless they had been circumcised. Paul stands that on its head. Merely having the outward sign does not guarantee a connection with Abraham nor a relationship with God. Paul is dealing with the error that was invading the New Testament church. Sadly, it was from a sect in Jerusalem led or at least approved by James. So a person is not a Jew by virtue of circumcision. Nor is a person a Christian by virtue of participation in the Christian symbols. Something more is required.

Circumcision's New Covenant Fulfillment (v. 29)

What was required was the Spirit and His work of circumcision *in the heart*.

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.

This is central to the New Covenant theology of the New Testament. God had promised to send the Spirit to dwell in His people, planting the Word of God in their souls. The Spirit would place believers into Christ and apply to them the work of Christ on the cross. The application of the death and resurrection of Christ would be a work of circumcision of the heart. The inner man would be set free from the dominating control of sin in the heart and in the body. T

What does the New Testament do with circumcision? Consider Colossians 2:8-15.

⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. ⁹ For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰ and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. ¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

The circumcision of the heart is the true fulfillment of the Old Testament. All through the New Testament and particularly in Paul's writing, Christians are connected to Abraham and his covenant, not to Moses and Israel's Law. Therefore, baptism is *not* the fulfillment of the Old Testament.

Circumcision is an example of a religious rite that was supposed to symbolize a spiritual reality, not procure it. The Jews trusted that being circumcised established their relationship with God and gave that right standing so that they would be accepted. The

problem was that disobedience to the rest of the Law undid the obedience to that one aspect of the Law.

In fact, even the Old Testament called for a circumcision of the heart. It is not a matter of externals, but issues of the heart. It is not, for example, that being baptized saves, but that those who believe and are saved, will be baptized. It is that the external obedience flows from a changed heart.

One other theme is being advanced here: the unity of the Jew and Gentile. Paul here defines who the true Jews were and are. Make no mistake that this is not just for now, but he reads this back into the Old Testament, as we will later see. A true Jew is one who has the inner work of the Spirit and is accepted and acknowledged by God. Thus, the Jew and Gentile are one on the grounds of God's inward and transforming work of the Spirit. The essential unity of Jews and Gentiles is in their common sinfulness and in their common salvation.

Who Hide behind Objections

(3:1-8)

¹ Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? ² Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. ³ What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? ⁴ By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, "That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged."

⁵ But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.)

⁶ By no means! For then how could God judge the world? ⁷ But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? ⁸ And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.

Paul then confronts the Jewish objections to his way of presenting the gospel. He models for us how to do apologetics; that is, how we anticipate and answer objections to the gospel. In doing so, he lays the foundation for what will come in Romans 9-11. So I will deal with this section briefly and save the details for later. Paul's teaching so far invokes 4 distinct, but related objections.

Objection: It undermines God's covenant (v.1-2)

Some would object that what then is the advantage or even the point of being a Jew? Paul responds by pointing to their having the very Word of God, which they did not believe. The Jews had an advantage in that they had the Word of God. The problem is not with the Scriptures nor with the Covenant. The problem is that the Jews did not believe the Word they had.

Objection: It nullifies God's faithfulness (v.3-4)

Some would contend that the Jew's unfaithfulness and unbelief thwarts the faithfulness of God. God is unable to keep His promises because the Jews didn't believe Him. Their unbelief does not nullify God's faithfulness. God was trustworthy and faithful

in keeping His promises. God was faithful to His purposes and promises even if the Jews were not. The unbelief of anyone, including the Jews, does not frustrate God nor does it nullify His promises.

Objection: It impugns God's justice (v.5-6)

Some would argue that since the unrighteousness and unbelief of the Jews serves to show the justice or righteousness of God, the what right does he have to judge them? Why should their unbelief invoke the justice and wrath of God? Paul's answer is basically that God judges the unbelief and wickedness of both Jew and Gentile, even when that is serving the purposes of God. (Stay tuned for chapters 9-11).

Objection: It falsely promotes God's glory (v.7-8)

The last objection is simply dismissed as being absurd. How can Paul be construed as having said, "Do more evil in order that more good may come?" Some had understood Paul to be saying that. Some still accuse Paul of saying that. It is slander. Just because all our sins have been forgiven us does not mean that we are free to sin as we please.

In this way as he often does, Paul anticipates and responds to valid objections. But generally, sinners are just hiding behind them.

Reflect and Respond

In hearing this condemnation of Jewish legalism, do you hear what may be true of you as well?

Well is it for us to remember the opening of the book: Paul says

¹⁵ So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

Are you suppressing the truth by your unrighteousness, whether it is the uprightness of wickedness or the unrighteousness of moralism?

Do you believe the gospel?