



BETHEL  
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# MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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## The Recipients of the Wrath of God: The Moral Religious, Part 5

Romans 2:25-29, For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. <sup>26</sup> So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? <sup>27</sup> Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. <sup>28</sup> For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>1</sup>

As we look at Paul's treatment of the morally upright as the recipient of God's wrath, we come to a very important passage, in fact the climax of Paul's discussion. However, when I first sat down to map out the first few chapters of Romans it wasn't at all apparent how Romans 2:25-29 fit in Paul's over-all argument.

- In Romans 2:1-5, 17-24, Paul indicts the Jew with regard to their hypocrisy.
- Then in Romans 2:25-29 Paul turns his attention to the issue of circumcision.

At first glance the connection between the two doesn't seem to make much sense. How does a

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001 (Romans 2:25–29). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

treatment on circumcision forward Paul's argument regarding the morally upright and God's wrath? What's the link here?

Before we deal with the specifics of Romans 2:25-29, let me discuss with you the link that joins our text with Paul's larger discussion on the wrath of God. Recall that in the mind of the Jew of Paul's day, salvation was obtained through a relationship with Abraham. When God established His covenant with Abraham, the Lord said this:

Genesis 17:7, "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you [speaking to Abraham] and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you."

The Jews took this (and passages like it) and concluded that if a person is to be the recipient of God's favor, they must be a "descendant of Abraham!" And how did a person become a "descendant of Abraham?" The Jewish answer at the time of Paul was, "Through circumcision!"

Genesis 17:9-10, "God said further to Abraham, 'Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. // This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised.'"

In fact, circumcision was so important that even after coming to Christ, many Jews still clung to the rite.

Acts 15:1, "And some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'"

Thus to the first century Jew, circumcision was the guarantee of God's good pleasure for it was the means through which one

- Became a child of Abraham.
- Received all the blessings promised to the patriarch.

It was unthinkable that a man, duly circumcised and admitted to the covenant, could receive God's wrath. Rabbi Levi reputedly said this:

In the hereafter Abraham will sit at the entrance of Gehenna, and permit no circumcised Israelite to descend therein. (Scharfstein, 2008)

Rabbi Menachem said this:

Our Rabbins have said, that no circumcised man will see hell. (Scharfstein, 2008, pp. 43-3)

This was the thinking of the Jews to whom Paul refers. Paul could have written ten more chapters, thousands of times more indicting regarding the Jews being the Recipient of God's Wrath. Yet so long as the Jew could retreat to the shelter of circumcision, Paul's words would have fallen on deaf ears! And so anticipating this final retreat, Paul wrote our passage to exclude circumcision as a viable refuge when it

came to God's wrath.

At the outset it must be understood that Paul is NOT being hyperbolic or hyper-critical with regard to circumcision. RATHER he is giving what might be called, "An Introduction to the Theology of the Sign and Seal of the Covenant of Grace." It was through this teaching that the final harbinger of hope that the Jew claimed in defense of their sin was removed. With that we begin with the merit or value of circumcision.

## The Merit/Value of Circumcision

Romans 2:25, "for indeed circumcision is of value, if you practice the Law."

Paul roots the value of the ordinance of circumcision to those "practicing the Law,"<sup>2</sup> which is a synonym for a genuine child of God. Unlike the non-Christian who is lawless,<sup>3</sup> the child of God is one who longs to fulfill/uphold the law of God, who "practices the Law." Peter speaking before the Sanhedrin said this:

Acts 5:32:, "And we are witnesses of these things; and *so is* the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him."

Unlike the non-Christian who again is characterized by lawless living, the child of God is one who strives to uphold the word of God in their lives. And thus another name for a Christian is "one who obeys God." Now don't let this trip you up. While we do not obey God perfectly<sup>4</sup> nevertheless the bent of our life reflects a tendency toward upholding the Law of God. Otherwise we'd be under formal discipline. Paul contrasts the sham Christian with the genuine Christian.

Romans 6:16, "Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone *as* slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?"

Paul classifies mankind into two categories. First, those who are slaves of sin, the non-Christian. And those who are slaves of obedience, the child of God. Now don't misunderstand. Paul is NOT saying that righteousness comes from personal obedience to the law of God. RATHER he is saying that salvation transforms the individual from being lawless to lawful. It transforms one who hates the law of God to one who longs to uphold it.<sup>5</sup> In fact as ones saved by grace, obedience has become our passion. Paul speaking of Christ said this:

Titus 2:14, "Who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify

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<sup>2</sup> Paul does NOT say, "Circumcision is of value if you fulfill the Law." RATHER, he says, "Circumcision is of value if you practice [present tense and hence an ongoing reality] the Law." The focus is not on our position before God, but our practice as His children! Furthermore, the substance of Paul's criticism of the Morally Upright in his day was that they were inconsistent in their practice. This led to a double standard in their theology. The Gentiles of Romans 1:19-32 were condemned on account of their practice. Yet the Jews practices the same sins as the Gentiles (Romans 2:1), but they believed that God's judgment did not apply to them on account of circumcision.

<sup>3</sup> Compare Romans 1:23; 2:8; 4:7; 1 Timothy 1:9; Titus 2:14; 2 Peter 2:8.

<sup>4</sup> Compare Romans 7:14ff; Galatians 5:17

<sup>5</sup> Compare Hebrews 5:9 and 1 Peter 1:2

for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds."

Isn't this what we see in Paul? Paul wrote that he:

Romans 7:22, "...joyfully concur[ed] with the law of God in the inner man."

From the perspective of Scripture, that which distinguishes the genuine Christian from the sham Christian is the effect of grace in their life. The Christian is pictured as being one who "practices the law of God" and so longs to fulfill it. Thus when we read of ones for whom circumcision is of "genuine value"<sup>6</sup> and there see it is those who "practice the law" we understand what Paul is saying. To the Jew who had the faith of Abraham and practiced the law of God; he didn't hide behind grace and use it as a cloak for sin as did those in Romans 2:1-5! Circumcision was profitable in that it was the picture and proof that the blessings promised by God belonged to him!

Now, this is what the church should teach at every baptism. Baptism is profitable in that is a picture and proof that the blessings promised by God belong to those who have the faith of Abraham and practice the law of God!

Don't ever forget that Abraham did not have the word of God to turn to in times of doubting. In fact in the thirty years prior to the birth of Isaac, God spoke to Abraham only five times<sup>7</sup> if you discount the first and last as the book ends of the time frame, that's once every ten years! Let me ask you these questions:

- How would your walk be if in the course of thirty years you only heard the teaching of the word of God five times?
- How fervent would your love for Christ be if in thirty years you only read the word of God five times?
- So how was Abraham to be encouraged when the doubts came?
- Where was Abraham to turn when the thought crept into his mind, "This salvation by grace through faith... did I make it up?"
- Where was Abraham to look?

Abraham was to consider his circumcision, a rite instituted by God which was intended to serve as proof that God saves by grace through faith alone!

Romans 4:11, "And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith [that is, the righteousness comes through faith] which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them."

This is the "value" of circumcision! It was not given as a means of salvation. Rather it was

1. A picture of the love of God,
2. The proof that God would never fail His people, and so

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<sup>6</sup> "Indeed circumcision is of value"

<sup>7</sup> Compare Genesis 12:11; 13:14; 15:1; 17:1; and 18:1

3. A testimony that God no longer was angry with the sinner on account of Christ.

But again this message is only valid to one who is saved and "practices the law of God" rather than using grace as an excuse for sinning. So circumcision has great value when it comes to the genuine servant of Christ. But if you are a transgressor of the Law [if your life testifies to a wicked and evil heart], your circumcision has become uncircumcision. To the Jew who rejected the promise made to Abraham, though he bore in his body a mark which identified him as a child of God, his circumcision was useless, an empty rite, and void of any benefit whatsoever.

Circumcision could not testify to the one without faith God's love since he clearly was not saved. Thus circumcision was an empty word of consolation and an empty rite.

At this point we rightly ask, "How necessary is circumcision?" This is an important question because the Jews maintained the circumcision was absolutely necessary for a person to be saved.<sup>8</sup> So again, what is the place of circumcision in the economy of God?

### The Necessity of Circumcision

Notice Paul gives a twofold answer to this question. First circumcision is not required for a relationship with God.

Romans 2: 26, "if therefore the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law."

If a Gentile fulfilled the necessary requisites for a relationship with God; i.e., he had genuine faith in Jesus Christ, and so a faith which according to the word of God, was not alone.

Once again why the stress on ethical obedience? Because many a Jew in Paul's day claimed salvation, but it was a sham.

Titus 1:16, "They profess to know God, but by *their* deeds they deny *Him*, being detestable and disobedient, and worthless for any good deed."

Romans 2:1, "Therefore you are without excuse, every man *of you* who passes judgment, for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things."

Paul in this text is speaking like James that we are saved by a faith that is not alone.<sup>9</sup> If a Gentile has genuine faith in Christ, he will have a faith that testifies to the working of grace in their lives.

Romans 2:27, "will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision."

Truly, the substance and efficacy of circumcision have always been based on whether or not the recipient himself had a "circumcised heart."<sup>10</sup> When a person comes to Christ, and Christ forgives his sin, places him a relationship with God, and gives him a new heart is it not true that he has been spiritually

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<sup>8</sup> Compare Acts 15:1

<sup>9</sup> Compare James 2:14-18

<sup>10</sup> Compare Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4

circumcised? Indeed! Consequently even before this "convert" received circumcision, he already enjoyed a relationship with God. From this we conclude that circumcision was not/is not required for a man to be accepted by God!

## **Circumcision Does Not Exclude One From Judgment**

Romans 2:27, "and will not he who is physically uncircumcised [i.e., the Gentile], if he keeps the Law [literally "if he brings the law to its appointed end" through faith in Christ], will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law?"

This would have been a difficult statement for Paul's contemporaries. The one not having the law will participate in the judgment of those who have the law and yet break it? That's right! Yet this is not to say that on the Day of Judgment the Gentile will do the actual judging. Rather, their "judging" will be by comparison; as Christ said.

Matthew 12:41-42, "The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here..."

Again this would have been an incredible statement to the Jew. Recall that they were the ones who considered themselves as living rebukes to the nations (cf. Romans 2:1). Yet through their obedient heart, that is, through their genuine salvation, the Gentile's life would condemn the very ones who had received the external sign of circumcision!

From this we conclude that while circumcision had importance in the Old Testament economy it was an ordinance of God given to verify the validity of His promises, it did not guarantee salvation. Thus the issue is not circumcision verses uncircumcision, but a pure heart verses an impure heart! Faith in Christ or faith in self!

With this, Paul transitions in his argument to expose the real meaning of circumcision; if it wasn't the guarantee of salvation, then what was it?

## **The Meaning of Circumcision**

Romans 2:28, "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh."

Paul states explicitly that circumcision is not simply an external sign. It can and many times does represent something that is secret and unseen (this is what is meant when circumcision is called a "seal" in the Bible, Romans 4:11). Now for the Jew this shouldn't have been radical; though it was. For they themselves understood that.

Romans 2:29, "But he is a Jew who is one inwardly..."

Truly this is the essence of being a Jew and so a child of God; inward transformation! Elsewhere, Paul wrote this:

Romans 9:6b-7a, "...For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants..."

In light of people like Josephus (a famous Jewish apostate of the first century) in fact, the entire Northern Kingdom<sup>11</sup> which went into exile in 722 BC, this would not have been a radical statement. It clearly wasn't to Paul. The genuineness of a child of Abraham, a true Jew was not an issue of nationality but spirituality! It didn't revolve around the rite of circumcision, but the righteousness to which circumcision bore witness! And so it was when it came to being part of Abraham's household.

Galatians 3:29, "And if you belong to Christ then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."

Don't miss Paul's point, the genuine child of God, the Jew, is the one who on account of regeneration inwardly obeys God and does His will; this is the one who "belongs to Christ." Now from this illustration which most Jews would have accepted Paul draws conclusions about circumcision.

Romans 2:29, "...and circumcision is that which is of the heart..."

When God saves an individual, He transforms them from the inside out! That was and is the message that God intended circumcision to proclaim. As Israel received the Ten Commandments for the second time, Moses exhorted the people of God, "Circumcise then your heart..." (Deuteronomy 10:16) Clearly the focus of the Kingdom of God from the very beginning was on the inward change of heart pictured by circumcision. That is what God is after! Having predicted the exile, Moses gave an important promise from God.

Deuteronomy 10:16, "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..."

Once again we see God's concern and the aim of Christianity! So to the Jew, or morally upright, where a heart change had never occurred, circumcision was nothing more than an empty rite! But where there was genuine salvation, circumcision was an effectual picture and so guarantee that God saves by grace through faith.

Do you get it? Does it make sense? Well just in case there might be any possibility that there are some who are cloudy on this point, Paul states it again:

Romans 2:29c, "...and circumcision is that which is... by the Spirit, not by the letter."

The contrast is the work of God in the heart; "by the Spirit," and the work of man in the world; "by the letter." Once again we see the significance of circumcision is far removed from a simple external act wherein a sign is placed upon a person. And yet this is what most Jews living in Paul's day believed! In contrast we learn that circumcision was a picture of (1) a spiritual reality, (2) the transformation of the sinner by the regenerating work of the Spirit.

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<sup>11</sup> Compare Hosea 1:9

Colossians 2:11, [In Christ], "...you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ."

This is talking about the regeneration we receive in Christ brought about by the work of the Holy Spirit. Those so circumcised in Christ by the Spirit constitute the true circumcision. This is why Paul could say of the Gentile church in Philippi, "For we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh." (Philippians 3:3)

Does circumcision or baptism save the recipient? Absolutely not! When it is placed upon someone who is not saved, it is a meaningless rite. But when it accompanies saving faith, it is a powerful confirmation that their faith in Christ is not in vain!

Now as a final jab and yet a most important point, Paul describes the people for whom circumcision (baptism) is of value. In contrast to those who receive circumcision so that they might "...make a good showing in the flesh" (Galatians 6:12), the genuine child of God is one whose "...praise is not from men, but from God." (Romans 2:29)

Paul uses a pun. He began this section (Romans 2:17) with reference to a title in which many boasted in Paul's day; "Jew." Now get this! The root for the word "Jew" [יְהוּדִי] means "praise" [יָדָה] (Genesis 29:35; 49:8). So while the Jew of Paul's day boasted that THEY were the ones who brought praise to God, the truth is that the one who is transformed by the grace of God is the one by which God alone is praised!

This is what Christianity is all about; being a vessel which God uses "to the praise of the glory of His grace." (Ephesians 1:6) Christianity is all about being a vessel by which and through God is glorified.

And what vessel is this? Those who have been circumcised? Baptized? No! Those who have been transformed in the inner man by grace and so do not rely upon the work of their hands to fulfill God's demands.

With that we are brought to ourselves with a difficult question: How many today in the church, like the Jew of Paul's day, are relying upon a FALSE refuge when it comes to salvation? Now let us be careful here. In his treatment of the morally upright religious, Paul is not talking about a glaring misstep in theology. In many ways the Jew of Paul's day was correct in their approach to God; but they had one seemingly *insignificant* error which cost them their soul.

No Jew would have taught that their salvation was secured by their works. It wasn't their religious devotion, duty, or good intentions that saved them. Their error wasn't that blatant. Rather they took an ordinance of God, circumcision, and slightly altered its significance. And this cost many their soul!

And so the question that faces us is this: Do we have this same in their approach to God? Many of us would not confess that our salvation is secured by works such as:

- Church attendance.
- Bible reading.
- Membership.
- Prayers.



- Religious acts of devotion.

However, in the many a church today if they are asked why they are saved they answer: "Because I believe Jesus." And that is the error! In fact "belief in Jesus as the basis of our salvation" is quite likely the twenty-first century equivalent to circumcision in evangelical circles.

- Jew: Why are you saved? Because I am circumcised.
- Twenty-first century man, why are you saved? Because I believe.

The demons believe and shudder. (James 2:19) Saul and Judas professed faith in the Messiah. Hundreds in Christ's day "received Him" (John 8:31; 6:66). Yet did you know that not one of them (based on what we know) were saved?

You are at a car dealership and the salesman offers you the buy of a lifetime and you say, "Yes!" Is the car bought? You have just finished the main course and the host offers you dessert and you say, "Yes!" Have you received the dessert? You are at a church and the preacher shares of Christ and says would you like to receive Him and you say, "Yes!" Have you received Him? Are you saved?

Some might say, wait a second, don't we read "And after he brought them out, he said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' And they said, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved...'" (Acts 16:30-31)

How then can I say that belief doesn't save? Because belief alone does not save! Belief never saved a soul from hell. And it never will. Listen to the passage again.

Acts 16:31, "And they said, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household.'"

See, it is not our belief that saves us. Rather it is Christ who saves. Belief/trust simply is the means whereby Christ's sacrifice becomes our own.

You say, "This is semantics!" I say, "No! This is a matter of life and death!" There may be some reading this who say they believe but their belief is no different than that of the demons, Judas', or many of the Jews of Paul's day. They do not actually rely upon Christ. Their faith is a cover and so an excuse for their sin. In the words of Paul, "They profess to know God but by their deeds they deny Him" (Titus 1:16)!

Listen, the faith that saves is a faith IN Christ and this faith results in a life characterized by...

- Trusting in Jesus.
- Relying upon Him.
- Living for Him.
- Striving after Him.
- In essence: Loving Him!

If your life does not speak of this love, this trust or reliance, then you can say you believe, but Paul would say that your belief is a sham! Therefore, put away your confidence in your faith. Rest your hope

solely in Christ and His cross-work. Receive the sacrifice of Christ as your own.<sup>12</sup> And so begin a life-time of fellowship and service in the Kingdom of God.

## **Bibliography**

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## **VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO**

Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10<sup>th</sup> Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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## **About the Preacher**

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on April 18, 2010. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.

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<sup>12</sup> Compare John 1:12