

Summary: What does it mean to be a doer of the law? Certainly it is not enough simply to be a Jew by circumcision! One must be circumcised inwardly (2:17-29), as even Moses said. So then the advantage of being a Jew (3:1-8) is that they received the word of God. God’s purpose was to bring judgment upon Jesus, and so he began by bringing judgment upon the Jews (3:9-20).

This whole passage flows out of the principle stated in verse 13 that
“it is not the hearers of the law that are righteous before God,
but the doers of the law who will be justified.”

What does it mean to be a doer of the law?

Does it mean that you can never sin?

No!

After all, the law taught Israel how to offer sacrifices for sin.

So what does it mean to be a “doer of the law”?

Put simply, it means that you not only hear what Gods says, but you do it!

When God says, “repent of your sins and believe in Jesus,”

you respond by repenting of your sins and believing in Jesus.

When God says, “love the Lord your God with all your heart,”

you respond by loving God.

When God says, “love your neighbor as your yourself,”

you respond by loving your neighbor.

(And then repenting of your sins when you fail.)

In Romans 1:18-3:20,

Paul is laying the foundation for his discussion of the righteousness of God.

In 1:16-17 Paul set forth his theme:

*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.*

*For in it [in the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith,
as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’*

In 1:18-32 Paul demonstrated that the wicked deserve God’s judgment
because they know God and they know that God condemns sin.

But don’t get cocky, because:

In 2:1-16 Paul turns on the one who ‘judges’ and says that you are no different!

And Paul points out that his language of “to the Jew first and also to the Greek,”
means that even as the Jews were the first to hear the message of salvation,
so also the Jews will be first to fall under God’s judgment.

It is not enough to be a Jew – to be a “hearer of the law” –

you must be a doer of the law –
because it is not the hearer of the law,
but the doers of the law who will be justified.

You cannot make excuses before God.

It won't work.

You have no defense before God.

So now at the end of chapter 2 Paul will make one more point.

We have seen that in chapter 1 Paul echoed the language of Jeremiah
as he condemned idolatry.

The condemnation of idolatry is directed not only at the Gentiles,
but also at apostate Jews.

But what about faithful Jews?

1. What matters is not hearing, but doing the law (2:17-29)

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 – (v17-20)

Paul here described the way that every faithful Jew thought of himself.

He is not being sarcastic.

A faithful Jew did rely on the law,

and while we might not think that “boasting” is a good thing,

yet Jeremiah 9 and Psalm 34 both speak of boasting in the Lord.

It is true, you should not boast about yourself, but you should boast in God!

And it is a good thing to know the will of God, and approve what is excellent,

and it was true that the faithful Jew was instructed from the law.

Faithful Israel was supposed to be a guide to the blind.

Deuteronomy 27 warned against those who mislead the blind,

and so faithful Jews sought to be guides to the blind,

a light to those who are in darkness.

In Isaiah 42 the LORD says to “my servant Israel”

6 “I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness;

I will take you by the hand and keep you;

I will give you as a covenant for the people,

a light for the nations,

7 to open the eyes that are blind,

to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.
8 I am the LORD; that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to carved idols.

It is only fair to admit that until Jesus came *everyone* thought that this meant Israel.
(After all, Isaiah *says* that the Servant is Israel: “But you, Israel, my servant”).
God had said that Israel was the Servant.
Israel was given as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations.
Israel was given to open the eyes of the blind,
and to bring light to those who sit in darkness.

So Paul understands that all these things are things that Israel was *supposed* to be.
It is a *good thing* for faithful Jews to think of themselves in this way,
because they *do* have “in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth.”

But there is a problem!
Even faithful Israel is not faithful enough.
While you teach others, do you teach yourself?
While you preach against stealing, do you steal?
You say “do not commit adultery,” but do you commit adultery?
You abhor idols, but do you rob temples?

Paul takes three key points of the law: stealing, adultery and idolatry,
and says that Israel has failed to live up to the very law that it boasted in:
You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.
And not only that, but as Isaiah 52:5 says,
The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.

Your sin dishonors God.
That’s bad enough.
But it is worse than that!

Because of your sin, the Gentiles blaspheme the name of God.
They look at you and say, “if that is what God is about, then who cares about God?”

Sound familiar?
Paul addressed this to the hypocritical Jew,
but it could just as easily be addressed today to the hypocritical Christian.
Jesus said that the way in which we love one another
would testify to the world that the Father has sent the Son.
When the world sees the church despising one another
they blaspheme the name of God because of *us*.

In verses 25-28 Paul points out:

*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.*

Let's make sure we understand who we are talking about.

Who are the circumcised?

That's easy – the Jews.

But who are the uncircumcised?

The Gentiles, right?

Yes, but not just any Gentile.

Rather, the “one who is uncircumcised and keeps the precepts of the law.”

Back in verses 14-15 Paul had said that the pagan Gentiles
do the “things of the law” and show the “work of the law” written on their hearts.
If he had used the same sorts of phrases here,
then we might suppose that he talking about the same sorts of people:
pagan Gentiles who have never encountered the law.

But there are four things that Paul says about these Gentiles:

- 1) they keep the precepts of the law (v26) --
not just the “things of the law” but the actual statutes;
- 2) they fulfill the law (v27) – the word here means more than just “keep”
it has the idea of completing or finishing;
- 3) their hearts are circumcised by the Spirit (v29)
- 4) and their praise is from God (v29).

In other words, the “uncircumcised who keeps the law” is referring to a Gentile Christian.

Paul is saying that circumcision indeed has value for those who keep the law.

After all, circumcision was the sign of the covenant with Abraham.

It was a sign of salvation.

And salvation has always been by grace.

But as Paul has said in verse 13, it is the doer of the law who will be justified –
NOT that you are justified *by* doing the law,
remember, in verse 13 Paul is talking about
our open acknowledgment and acquittal at the final judgment.

Paul will deal with this in chapters 3-4 when he will clearly state
that we are not justified by works of the law, but by faith.

In chapter 4 Paul will say that Abraham is the father of all those who have faith –
regardless of whether they are circumcised.

Paul's point here is that you may not be merely a hearer of the law.

If all you do is “hear” the law, then you are not really a Jew –

your circumcision has become uncircumcision.
In other words, you are no better than a Gentile!

*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.*

We often think of this a radically “New Testament” statement.

But that is why I read Deuteronomy 10 earlier.

When God commanded Israel to love, fear and serve him
“with all your heart and with all your soul,”

He also said that the motivation behind this is because
“the LORD set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them,
you above all peoples, as you are this day.”

And so therefore, because God has set his love upon you:

“Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.” (10:15-16)

Moses was the one who taught that circumcision was not merely outward.

Circumcision is a matter of the heart.

If all you have is the outward sign, then you are missing the point.

This is also true of baptism.

Paul is concerned with the Jews at this point,
but he is explaining how the sacraments work.

Just having your foreskin snipped does not guarantee anything.

Just getting wet doesn't guarantee anything.

True circumcision is the inward circumcision when we are united to Christ,
and our old nature is cut off by the Spirit of God,
and we become participants in the new creation.

The outward sign – the cutting off of the foreskin –
was a picture of the cutting off of the old man.

It was a picture of regeneration and the forgiveness of sins by the Holy Spirit.

But if the outward sign is not connected with the inward reality,
then there is something missing!

And so some would say, “then why bother with the outward sign?”

Indeed, you could summarize the first eight verses of chapter 3 by asking:

2. But if the “inward” is all that matters, what is the point of being a Jew? (3:1-8)

As Paul puts it:

*Then what advantage has the Jew?
Or what is the value of circumcision?*

Much in every way.

We need to take Paul seriously here.

You might think that after emphasizing “inward” circumcision that Paul would say that being a Jew had no value.

But Paul says that there was great advantage in being a Jew.

To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.

We sang Psalm 147.

The last stanza can be a little shocking to some:

19. To Jacob God declares his word and makes his doctrines known;
his ordinances he reveals to Israel alone.

20. He has not dealt in such a way with any other race –
to us alone he shows his laws. O praise the LORD of grace.

Paul says that this is true.

God revealed his word to Israel.

God spoke to Israel and they heard his word – unlike any other nation.

The message of salvation was proclaimed to the Jews.

That alone should remind us of the advantage of being a Jew.

But watch carefully what Paul does.

He just said, “to begin with” (literally, “first”).

He is talking about the advantages of the Jew – the value of circumcision.

We would expect to see the list continue with a “second” and a “third.”

But instead Paul begins a series of questions.

I would suggest that this series of questions in verses 3-8

is Paul’s answer to the question “what is the advantage of the Jew?”

Notice that in verse 9 Paul will turn to a different question:

“Are we Jews any better off?”

And his answer is “No, not at all.”

This might sound contradictory:

What advantage has the Jew?

Much in every way.

Are we Jews any better off?

No, not at all.

(To give you a hint of how Paul will resolve this, look at 3:19-22 –

Paul is saying that the advantage of the Jew, in having the oracles of God,
was designed to bear witness to the righteousness of God)

And so he asks,

What if some were unfaithful?

God entrusted Israel with his word – his oracles.

He called Israel to circumcise their hearts and love the LORD their God.

But some were unfaithful.

Indeed, this was a constant refrain throughout Israel's history,

from the rebellion in the wilderness

to the idolatry in the days of the judges and the kings.

After the Exile, while the Jews thought they had improved,

they wound up crucifying the Lord of Glory – their own Messiah.

Paul himself had been a chief example of “faithlessness” when he persecuted the church.

So,

Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?

Paul answers this with a ringing: “By no means!”

The phrase *me genoito* in Greek is a very emphatic statement.

Absolutely NOT! May it never be! Of course not!

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.

This comes from Psalm 51 –

which reflects on a classic instance of the faithlessness of Israel.

In Psalm 51, David, the anointed king, laments his sin against God.

Last week we read 2 Samuel 12,

when Nathan confronted David with his sin.

Paul has been using Nathan's strategy in showing the Jews

that they are no better than the Gentiles.

And so here Paul cites Psalm 51 to say that God will be justified –

his verdict will be vindicated.

God will prevail in judgment.

In short, God is righteous.

What do we mean when we say that God is righteous?

He is just – certainly we mean that, at least!

God is a just judge who always does what is right.

But there is more to God's righteousness than that.

Throughout scripture God's righteousness is bound up with his work of salvation.

When you think about the righteousness of God, you should think about his saving work,

because *in the gospel* the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith.

God is just, and that is good news!
Because God's purpose in Israel's rebellion will be vindicated.

Even when Israel is faithless, that does not nullify the faithfulness of God.
Because even Israel's faithlessness is part of God's purpose.

That is why Paul then asks:

*But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God,
what shall we say?*

That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us?

(Paul is uncomfortable even suggesting such language, so he adds:)

I speak in a human way.

If Israel's failure is part of God's purposes in salvation,
then is God unrighteous to inflict wrath on Israel?

And Paul answers:

By no means! [absolutely not!]

For then how could God judge the world?

How could judge the world if he does not judge Israel first?

(remember Paul's "to the Jew first and also to the Greek?")

So the second advantage of the Jew (you might say) is that the Jew got to be judged first!

*But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory,
why am I still being condemned as a sinner? (v7)*

If the judgment of God against faithless Israel results in God's glory,
then isn't this a good thing?

The Jews had always thought that faithful Israel would pass through suffering to glory.

But now Paul is saying that even faithful Israel isn't good enough.

The advantage of the Jew is not that he is triumphantly vindicated,
but that he falls under judgment!

If this is the only advantage to being a Jew, then

Why not do evil that good may come?

(as some people slanderously charge us with saying.)

Their condemnation is just.

Apparently some were saying that Paul's view of history was antinomian (against the law),
and that since God's purposes for Israel included Israel's sin,
therefore no one could be blamed for sinning.

But Paul says that this misses his point:

God's purpose for Israel was to focus his judgment on one nation.

Think of the history of redemption:

God singled out Abraham from all of humanity,
and established his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
And then when Israel continually rebelled against him,
God chose David and his house to be king over Israel.

God was teaching his people about the importance of a mediator.
Rather than deal with all of humanity at once,
God chose Israel as the place to focus his blessings *and* curses.
And then he narrowed that focus once more in David,
as the anointed king became the center of God's judgment.
And in Jesus Christ that judgment and that blessing is focused on one man.

That's why Paul says in verse 9:

Are we Jews any better off?

No, not at all.

For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin.

So yes, there was an advantage for the Jew –
they had received the oracles of God.

But that does not change the fact that they are under the power of sin.

And even as the curse of sin is the same for Jew and Gentile,
so also the remedy is the same –

“the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe.”

And while Paul may have been one of the first to see how all of this is about Jesus,
Psalm 67 had spoken centuries before of how the judgment of God
is something that all the nations should sing about...