



Romans - Chapter Two

II Romans 1:18-3:20 - God's righteousness in His wrath against sinners (continues)

Summary of Chapter Two

In this chapter, Paul continues to look at how incorrect understanding of the covenant requirements of the Jews, both in terms of the keeping of the law and their badge of membership, circumcision, had led to an artificial national pride and an incorrect hope that salvation was theirs by right of being part of the covenant.

Paul points out that as long as there are Jews who sin, thus breaking the covenant with God and bringing disrepute to his name, then the argument that salvation comes by right by simply being Jewish does not hold. Similarly, Gentiles who keep the law, even though they themselves were not given the law, had no idea they were keeping the law but were doing so through their understanding of God's requirements simply because they were created by him, in his very image, and thus had an in-built understanding of God's moral code, could be judged to have kept the law.

Jew and Gentile alike, if they have sinned and have not come to repentance before God for that sin, will be judged by God as sinners. God shows no partiality to the Jews, who had the law, or the Gentiles, who did not have it, in these circumstances.

Paul strongly argues that the Jews' fervent nationalistic pride and their reliance on the law as a written code for salvation was actually a barrier for some, as they had failed to realise their keeping of the law had become ritualistic and they had stopped listening to God's call on their lives, and the need to respond to that, which was the important aspect of the covenant. God is faithful and will keep his promises, but we must keep ours too.

Paul concludes the chapter with a bombshell. He states that the uncircumcised Gentile can fulfil the law, which itself requires circumcision in order to be kept. But Paul, in line with what the Jewish prophets had called for hundreds of years earlier, goes on to say that God, through the Holy Spirit and inferring also through the death of Jesus, has now circumcised the Gentile believers and written his new law on their hearts, thus creating a new covenant, not based of Jewish ethnicity and the written code, but on faith.

II.b Romans 2:1-3:8 - The unrighteousness of the Jews

The Jews are not exempt from God's judgment. Being a Jew does not by or of itself place a person beyond the requirement of upholding what is righteous and true of God in themselves. It is not a question of having the law or knowing the law but of doing the law. In addition, circumcision is not an outward, physical thing but inward, it is circumcision of the heart that

will release a person to turn to God in faith.

II.b.i Romans 2:1-16 - God's righteous judgment

Most interpreters argue that Paul focuses on the sin of the Jews throughout this chapter. Another view is that the sin of the moralist, whether Jewish or Gentile, is condemned in vv.1-16. What becomes clear in these passages is that Paul accepts God to be loving and just, but also a God who determined to set the world right, back to the way it was intended. Many Jews of Paul's day, and indeed many Christians today, seem to think that final judgement is something that will no longer affect them. The Jew believing he is secure in the ceremonial law and the Christian through the death of Jesus, but what Paul is showing here is that you can push God only so far and, if those who are unrepentant sinners, persist in their disobedience towards God, then there will come a day when they will have to stand before God and face the full force of his wrath against them for their chosen deeds and actions. Those who choose to follow Christ, although they will be far from righteous in this life, will have a different outcome on that day.

¹ You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.

Romans 2:1

By starting with you, therefore Paul is switching from the third person plural to the second person singular, introducing an imaginary interlocutor, with whom he can then have an argument over a number of issues. His readers would imagine someone listening to the polemic of Romans 1:18-32 and heartily joining in its condemnation of idolatry, homosexual practice, and the rest. Such a one would feel safe passing judgement on 'the other', either because he thought himself free of such vices, or because he thought the attack was directed against others and not himself. The onlooker is envisaged then as striking a judgemental posture either thoughtlessly, or as one who presumes himself exempt from such criticism. Paul's rhetorical tactic is designed to expose the self-deceitfulness of such a pose.

Paul's denunciation is abrupt: you do the same things. God does not condemn them merely because they judged others but because they practiced the same sins they condemned in others, especially those mentioned in Romans 1:29-31. All people are without excuse because all, without exception, have sinned against God.

² Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth.

Romans 2:2

The appearance of the word truth somewhat strengthens the possibility that there is an attempt to usurp the role of the Creator, which is so improper to the creature. That is to say, the same things in v.1 would be the adoption of an attitude as much expressive of man's rebellion toward God as any of the evils and improprieties itemised in Chapter One.

'God's judgement is according to truth', could well be taken to imply in contrast that the judgement of the critical onlooker was not according to truth, was a misapprehension of God's truth, i.e. that only the Creator can deliver such a judgement, was in fact a form of suppressing the truth (Romans 1:18).

It is much more likely, however, that Paul's attack is aimed most directly at what he sees to be a typically Jewish attitude. Paul probably has in mind someone who would identify with his typically Jewish polemic against idolatry, who would applaud the typically Jewish condemnation of homosexual practice, and who consequently might miss the wider relevance of the final and broader list of anti-social vices. This indeed may help explain the

order of the polemic in Romans 1:18-32; having played to the gallery of Jewish assurance of moral superiority over the Gentile, he then broadened out his description of human corruption in order to provide a base for his attack on that very assurance. Hence the appeal of v.2, the 'we' who know God's judgement are most obviously those familiar with the Jewish scriptures. That is, an imagined Jewish interlocutor, or indeed any among his readers who knew and approved the typically Jewish polemic of Chapter One, and who might not unnaturally assume that whoever Paul had been attacking, it was not them!

³ So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? ⁴ Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realising that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?

Romans 2:3-4

Do you show contempt for is probably directed against Jews who thought that their covenant relationship with God would shield them from final judgment. After all, they had often experienced his kindness, tolerance and patience. They thought such blessings showed that they were right with God and had no need to trust in Christ, but Paul says the opposite is true: God's blessings should have led them to repent of their sins.

The impression that Paul has in mind a Jewish overconfidence in God's favour for, and obligation to, Israel is strengthened here with their rather striking parallels in literature which was known to Paul, and which expresses something of this assurance of a favoured status based on and protected by God's election. Paul says in effect, 'Such overconfidence is in fact a despising of God's goodness, forbearance and patience of God of which you are so confident'.

It is just such an attitude that leads Paul to point out that God's kindness leads you toward repentance; that is, our natural desire in response to God's tolerance and natural goodness should bring us to our knees before him by way of natural desire on our part. One day all will come to repentance, first the Jew, then the Gentile.

⁵ But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.

Romans 2:5

A soft and repentant heart is needed to avert God's wrath on the day of God's wrath, the final judgment. Such repentance would express itself in trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Paul disagrees with much of the Jewish teaching of his day, according to which the Jews were not storing up wrath but were in good standing with God through their covenant relationship, not needing to meet God's standard of perfect obedience but needing only an intention to obey God.

Paul is warning that the Jews are placing too much reliance on the covenant promises covering them no matter how they have led their lives, providing they have done so according to their interpretation of the law: but both Moses and Jeremiah had warned them of such complacency: <<Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer>> (Deuteronomy 10:16), and: <<Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done — burn with no one to quench it>> (Jeremiah 4:4). The very act of passing judgement on others presumes a favourable judgement of God on oneself, and so manifests an equal, if not greater, hardness of heart, an equal if not greater need to repent.

In all this, it is very difficult to avoid the conclusion that Paul's aim is directed at what he sees to be the overconfidence in their election on the part of many of his fellow Jews. We of the 21st Century listening to this, can point to other statements from the Judaism of the same period, which express a greater humility and rejoice that opportunity for repentance, and means of atonement are provided within the covenant. But we cannot assume that these writings are typical of the actual Judaism of Paul's time, any more that we can assume that Deuteronomy and Jeremiah are representative of the Israelite religion of their time. The passages from Jewish writings already adduced, when set alongside the attitude Paul attacks, provide sufficient evidence that Paul's interlocutor was no straw man. The dominant or at least a prominent mood within Judaism prior to AD70 may well have actually been preserved from the period represented. Indeed we know from: <<though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless>> (Philippians 3:4-6), that such self-confidence has been typical of Paul himself in his days as a Pharisee before Christ, apparently oblivious of his own need of a fundamental repentance. In fact we would probably not be far from the mark if we were to conclude that Paul's interlocutor is Paul himself, i.e. Paul the unconverted Pharisee, expressing attitudes Paul remembered so well as having been his own! To such a one Paul gives a warning of the impending wrath on the last day.

⁶ God "will give to each person according to what he has done." ⁷ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life. ⁸ But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. ⁹ There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; ¹⁰ but glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. ¹¹ For God does not show favouritism.

Romans 2:6-11

Paul establishes the principle that judgment is according to what he has done (his works). The structure of the passage is clear. Verse 6 enunciates the principle. Verses 7-10 work it out more specifically with an ABBA pattern, a chiasm, e.g. <<Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last>> (Luke 13:30). Verse 11 then explains why God judges according to works, i.e. because he is impartial. When Paul speaks of those who are rewarded for doing good works (v.7 and v.10), is he speaking hypothetically or of real obedience? The hypothetical view fits with the theme of the section as a whole (Romans 1:18-3:20), where all are condemned for sin, and righteousness does not come by works of law. It seems more likely, however, that Paul is speaking here of real obedience that is rewarded on the last day, such obedience being the result of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, as Paul explains at the conclusion of the chapter (vv.26-29). Impartiality in judgment (v.11) is a regular requirement in the OT: <<Do not show partiality in judging; hear both small and great alike. Do not be afraid of any man, for judgment belongs to God. Bring me any case too hard for you, and I will hear it>> (Deuteronomy 1:17), and: <<Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people fairly. Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous. Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the Lord your God is giving you>> (Deuteronomy 16:18-20), reflecting the righteousness of God's judgment: <<For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes>> (Deuteronomy 10:17).

Paul sets his antithesis on two kinds of works. The first group are those whose persistence in doing good (v.7) is in order to attain immortality. On the other hand there are those who out of selfishness, selfish ambition, i.e. self-seeking (v.8), are disobedient to the truth and let themselves be persuaded to injustice. The contrast is striking and is carefully drawn. The horizon is now not future generations and heaven, but is narrowed to self; the governing and motivating aim is directed to their own advantage. This is not to be seen as an irreligious attitude in contrast to the religious attitude of v.7. The over-confident Jew can be persuaded to justify injustice in the name of their religion, in advancement of their own piety, even with regard to the same things as those listed in Romans 1:29-31.

First for the Jew (v.10) does not imply a priority of privilege just that the Jews will be the first to receive the blessings for those who have turned to God but also the first for condemnation for those who have not; the Jew is not in a privileged position at all. As Paul points out with the devastating simplicity of generalisation whose breadth of application has come home with something of a shock: For God does not show favouritism (v.11). He shows none of the partiality between Jew and Gentile that the Jewish self-confidence in divine election had come to assume.

¹² All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law.

Romans 2:12

All will be judged according to the standard they had. The Gentiles will perish, i.e. face final judgment, because of their sin (vv.14-15), even though they are apart from the law, i.e. they don't have the written laws of the OT. The Jews are not spared judgment simply because they possess the law, for those who transgress the law will be judged for their transgressions. It is unrepented sin that will condemn a person, for although the law may be a badge that separates Jew from Gentile, it does not of itself secure the Jew from condemnation.

¹³ For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.

Romans 2:13

Paul reaffirms the principle enunciated in vv.6-11, that those who obey the law are the ones who are righteous in God's sight, and that their justification will be declared righteous on the last day.

¹⁴ (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, ¹⁵ since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) ¹⁶ This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

Romans 2:14-16

Some have suggested that these verses speak of Gentile obedience that leads to salvation (v.7 and v.10). It is clear, however, that Paul explains here why Gentiles who do not have the law will face judgment apart from the law (see v.12). The reason it is fair for God to judge them for their evil is that God's law is written on their hearts, so that their consciences attest to what is right and what is wrong in their behaviour. Paul does not imply that the testimony of human conscience is always a perfect moral guide, for people have thoughts now accusing their moral behaviour, sometimes excusing themselves from wrongdoing, but the very existence of this testimony is sufficient to render people accountable to God. Elsewhere Paul indicates that

people's consciences can be distorted by sin: <<But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled>> (1 Corinthians 8:7), <<For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols?>> (1 Corinthians 8:10), <<the other man's conscience, I mean, not yours. For why should my freedom be judged by another's conscience?>> (1 Corinthians 10:29), <<Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron>> (1 Timothy 4:2), and: <<To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted>> (Titus 1:15).

We need also to recognise that all people are made in God's image and have an inherent sense of right and wrong, according to God's decrees, but Paul is not advocating a natural law here. He is clearly referring to God's law as it was revealed to the Jewish people through Moses. Such moral awareness will serve in place of the law in the day of judgement, the measure by which those who sinned outside the law will be judged (v.12); the implication being that those who responded to such natural promptings would fare better in the day of judgement than the Jew who sinned with the law.

The second witness he calls to give evidence of Gentile awareness of moral responsibility is their consciences. The idea of conscience as an inward monitor, which assesses and condemns deeds already committed was widespread in Hellenism, but the idea as such is hardly to be found in Judaism prior to apocryphal writings, specifically Wisdom of Solomon 17:11. It thus illustrates Paul's point well of a moral consciousness outside the Jewish people and independent of the law as such.

The third proof he calls is the evidence of inward moral conflict among the Gentiles, i.e. their thoughts now accusing. He who knows what he should do and fails to do it, provides the testimony of conflicting thoughts, some condemning the failure, others offering excuses for it. Here, Paul's readers would note, is a doing of the things of the law which is essentially an inward matter, at the level of the heart, conscience and thought, and which Paul sets in approving antithesis over against Jewish pride and confidence in possessing the law.

Judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ. Although we are right to believe that we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ, it should be noted that it is a condition for the here and now, and not a condition for the day of judgement. Once we come to saving faith in Jesus, we join those who are a new covenant people with God; but, like the Jews who will be judged for the doing of the law, we will face judgement according to the outworks of our faith in Christ. It is not simply enough to say we believe in Christ then sit back and wait to be whisked off to heaven when our time on earth comes to an end. We are called to serve God in this life and we are required to continually seek and then do his will for us. The saving grace is that God shows no partiality and that, through Jesus, we have true justice.

My Gospel. Not Paul's alone, but the Gospel of Christ that he preaches.

II.b.ii Romans 2:17-29 - The Jews and the Law

If we extend Paul's thought as far ahead as Romans 3:27-30 <<Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith>>, the line of Paul's eschatological interpretation of these passages may be conjectured thus: it is not just particular acts of transgression, but the whole attitude of the law expressed in the previous verses, which amounts to a perversion of God's purpose for Israel and the nations, and which results in the nations continuing to regard God simply as the national God of

a small nation and thus to dishonour him who is the only God; God of all. Paul now continues to focus on the sin of the Jews. They are indicted for failing to practice what they preach.

Romans 2:17-20

Paul details the privileges of the Jews as the elect people of God. Their advantages are genuine, for God has given them his law and hence they are able to instruct the Gentiles with the truths God revealed to them.

¹⁷ Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God;

Romans 2:17

Paul's opening statement, you call yourself a Jew, identifies his mystery interlocutor. However, Paul is not challenging all Jews here, nor does he have a specific Jew in mind, but any Jew who has transgressed the law and can identify with what Paul is saying. His argument is that the transgression of any individual Jew is enough to call in question the Jewish assumption that as a Jew he stands in a position of privilege and superiority before God as compared with the Gentile. The point is that once the typical Jew's privileged status as Jew before God by virtue of his people's election is seen to be called in question, then the broader indictment of man in general (Romans 1:18-32), can be seen to apply more clearly to Jew as well as Gentile (vv.9-11).

Brag about your relationship to God. Of itself, Paul does not see this as a bad thing: <<Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation>> (Romans 5:11), it is the boasting of him as the God of Israel that could lead to problems. For, although they were his chosen people, and remain so, and that he gave them the law, they had come to believe that the answer to 'what does God want of me?' is bound up in the law, and by having the law, the Jew is secure in the knowledge of fulfilling God's purpose for him in life. We must never forget that many Jews were and still are zealous and pious in their duties toward God.

¹⁸ if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; ¹⁹ if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth

Romans 2:18-20

Guide; light. These passages are loosely based on Isaiah 42:6-7 <<I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness>>, but Jesus gives a warning to the Jews who believe they are guides for the Gentiles, but do not live their own lives to God: <<Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit">> (Matthew 15:14). Israel was chosen by God to be a beacon for the rest of the world to come to God through them, but Israel had failed to keep the laws God had given them and, after years, of repeated warnings, God finally sent them into exile. Some had returned but now found themselves under the rule of pagans, the very people they expected to be subject to them in God's economy. Here, Paul is not challenging that the Jews cannot fulfil the roles described: to be a light, a guide, an instructor, a teacher. The point he is making is that the Jew does not become this simply by being a Jew and by belonging to a people that have God's law in their possession, he will have to again establish credibility with God and, since God had placed the solution in the world, that would require them to turn to Jesus first.

You have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth. Many Jews seemed to see the law as being a manual for life. Paul is making the assertion in his letter that discernment of God's will and God's priorities in any instance is not to be read off the Torah but comes through a much more existential openness to God and his Spirit: <<And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ>> (Philippians 1:9-10); that Christ is the true embodiment of God's wisdom, not the law, and that it is only through the Gospel that Israel's role as guide for the blind and a light for those who are in the dark can be fulfilled: <<Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God>> (1 Corinthians 4:5), and: <<For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ>> (2 Corinthians 4:6). This is the very role the Jew per se is rejecting by his rejection of the Gospel and of Jesus as the Christ.

Romans 2:21-24

Paul zeros in on the main problem with the Jews. They fail to practice the law they proclaim, and hence they will face judgment. Their boast in God is nullified by their failure to obey him. Obviously, Paul is not accusing all Jews of stealing, committing adultery, and robbing temples. It is possible that Paul's critique of the Jews is similar to what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-48), so that the Jews are criticised for not observing the true intent of the law. But it is more likely that Paul is speaking literally of Jewish disobedience, citing glaring examples to illustrate the principle that the Jews transgress the very law they treasure and teach.

²¹ you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? ²² You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

Romans 2:21-22

Teach others; teach yourself. Paul asserts that the Jews believe they are in the rightful possession to teach the Gentiles, which was God's intention when he chose them as a pointer to himself in the first place. Unfortunately, they had not taught themselves the law, or at least, they had only learned it at one level. Resting on the law, being instructed out of the law, having the law as an embodiment of knowledge and truth is not enough; for they preach against stealing and yet there are Jews who steal; they preach against committing adultery, yet there are Jews, (and their leaders had a particularly poor reputation for it), who commit adultery.

Rob temples. Robbing temples was a common crime in the ancient world because temples housed expensive articles that could be sold for profit. Since the law taught that temples were idolatrous and Jews should not be in them or treasuring things from them: <<The images of their gods you are to burn in the fire. Do not covet the silver and gold on them, and do not take it for yourselves, or you will be ensnared by it, for it is detestable to the Lord your God. Do not bring a detestable thing into your house or you, like it, will be set apart for destruction. Utterly abhor and detest it, for it is set apart for destruction>> (Deuteronomy 7:25-26), the Jewish plundering of pagan temples would involve not just stealing but self-defilement and sacrilege as well.

The implications are again clear that national boasting in the law has to be set alongside the fact that Jews dishonour God by breaking the same law: national pride is misplaced; the Jew as Jew is no better than the Gentile as Gentile, and his sin will be judged as severely as that of the Gentile (v.12).

²³ You who brag about the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law? ²⁴ As it is written: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”

Romans 2:23-24

Because they violated the law, the Jews were exiled by God and were therefore reviled by the Gentiles; Paul adapts phrases from the Septuagint translation of Isaiah 52:5, where the NIV reads: <<“And now what do I have here?” declares the Lord. “For my people have been taken away for nothing, and those who rule them mock,” declares the Lord. “And all day long my name is constantly blasphemed” >>, confirmed in Ezekiel 36:20-23 <<And wherever they went among the nations they profaned my holy name, for it was said of them, ‘These are the Lord’s people, and yet they had to leave his land.’ I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel profaned among the nations where they had gone. “Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Sovereign Lord, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes>>. This dishonoured God because they were known as his people. In Paul’s time their sins did not lead to exile but still led Gentiles to dishonour the God whom the sinful Jews claimed to follow.

²⁵ Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised.

Romans 2:25

The argument takes a final tightening turn by abruptly introducing the subject of circumcision. To understand how it is that this large discussion can be narrowed down to such a specific focus, we must recall just how fundamental circumcision was for the Jews of Paul’s day. The Jews were inclined to believe that they would be spared at the last judgment by virtue of their circumcision. Circumcision was required of all Jewish males for entrance into the covenant: <<Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner – those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant>> (Genesis 17:9-14), and: <<On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised>> (Leviticus 12:3), and hence it was likely viewed as a form of covenant protection.

This sense of circumcision’s importance had been strengthened in the Hellenistic period, the time following Alexander the Great’s capture circa 330BC and subsequent Greek rule of the region as part of the Seleucid Empire, by way of reaction to Hellenism’s distaste for the rite, and ever since the Maccabees (164-63BC), circumcision had been seen as an absolutely essential expression of Israel’s national identity and religion. Even the Herod dynasty, Idumæan and thoroughly Hellenist though they were in culture and lifestyle, recognised that circumcision had the force of a national taboo which could not be broken.

Significant also are the number of Greco-Roman authors who simply identify circumcision as being a Jew; indicative of the image projected by Jews in Roman society at the time Paul

was writing. Such an image prevented many 'God-worshippers' attracted by Judaism from taking the final step and becoming proselytes. Those reading or hearing Paul's letter would thus recognise the connection of thought without difficulty; circumcision was fundamental to the typical Jew's self-understanding, the mark of his religious distinctiveness, the badge of national privilege, the seal of God's covenant favour to Israel; his chosen people. The confidence that circumcision secured the Israelite's salvation, which we find coming to expression within the sayings of later rabbinic Judaism, is the confidence of Paul's interlocutor, the same presumption of God's favour which long before had resulted in exile (v.24).

Not been circumcised or uncircumcision in some translations. Paul argues, however, that those who violate the law are counted before God as uncircumcised. In other words, they are outside the covenant and therefore destined for judgment. Circumcision would be of value, Greek *ōpheleō*, for salvation if the circumcised would observe the law perfectly, but no one, except Jesus, can do that. Paul takes up the issue of circumcision again in Romans 4:9-16, Galatians 2:3-5, 5:2-12 and 6:12-15.

²⁶ If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised?

Romans 2:26

On the other hand, a person who is not circumcised but who keeps the moral norms of the law will be counted as circumcised, i.e. a member of the covenant people. Those in Rome who had attended synagogues as God-fearers would be delighted to see the way Paul's argument was going; that is, to be a full member of the covenant it was the keeping of the law that was important and it was not necessary to be circumcised to receive the full blessings God had promised to Israel.

²⁷ The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.

Romans 2:27

And those Gentiles who are not circumcised but keep the law will stand at the judgment and condemn, either literally or by testimony of their good deeds, the Jews who had the covenantal advantages of the law, i.e. the written code and circumcision. The Jew who fulfils the law simply by performing the acts, keeping the sacred days and being circumcised is actually a transgressor of the law, for he has missed the point of the law and of circumcision. What he counts as 'doing the law', Paul counts as 'transgressing the law'. In consequence it is not a case of the faithful Jew passing judgment of the lawless Gentile, as the interlocutor began by thinking (vv.1-3), but rather a case of the law-fulfilling Gentile, by his faith and life, passing judgement on the law-transgressing Jew; this is what God's judgement of human secrets will reveal in the day of judgement (v.16).

But who are these Gentiles who 'keep the requirements of the law', and who even 'fulfil the law' despite being uncircumcised? Paul knows perfectly well how odd that last sentence must sound to any well-educated Jew. Circumcision was one of the law's commandments; how then can an uncircumcised person be 'fulfilling the law'? <<Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts>> (1 Corinthians 7:19). Paul goes on to answer this enigma in vv.28-29. The answer to us these days may of course seem obvious but needed to be revealed to those in the Roman churches; the people in question are Gentile Christians: <<Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a

letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant – not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life>> (2 Corinthians 3:1-6).

²⁸ A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical.

Romans 2:28

Verses 28-29 function as the ground of vv.26-27. In striking contrast to the Jewish beliefs of his day, Paul claims that true Jewishness and genuine circumcision are not ethnic or physical matters.

One thing that can differentiate supermarket own-brand goods and those of famous named brands is not the labelling on the packaging, which can be very similar and sometimes misleading, but it is the quality of what is on the inside. If a man is outwardly a Jew, but does not have the quality on the inside that God requires, then Paul argues he is not really a Jew. Jeremiah also may have seen such a man as a cheap replica, intended to deceive: <<You live in the midst of deception; in their deceit they refuse to acknowledge me," declares the Lord>> (Jeremiah 9:6).

In line with the prophecies of Jeremiah Chapter 31 and Ezekiel Chapter 36, and for that matter with the explosive spiritual experience of all the early Christians, Paul believed that through Christ Jesus, God had renewed the covenant, and was now welcoming into that new family all those, irrespective of ethnic background and hence of outward signs such as circumcision, who believed the Gospel. He is here sketching in, very briefly, the much fuller picture of Christian life, of the renewal of the heart by God's Spirit, to which he will return later.

This leads him to a very sharp point indeed, which has been as controversial in our own time as it no doubt was when Paul first wrote it. He declares that the label on the package is irrelevant, and that when you find the real thing in a package with a different label you should call the real thing by the right name even if it comes from somewhere else. He takes the holy word 'Jew' itself, and declares that when God works by the Holy Spirit in a Gentile heart to produce the true fulfilment of the law, that Gentile is to be called a 'Jew', even though he or she was not born into a Jewish family. This radical shift in meaning for the ancient name of God's people continues to haunt this letter.

²⁹ No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God.

Romans 2:29

True Jewishness and true circumcision are matters of the heart. They are the work of the Spirit. The written code/Spirit contrast occurs three times in Paul: <<But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code>> (Romans 7:6), and: <<He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant – not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life>> (2 Corinthians 3:6), and always compares the old era of redemptive history with the new age inaugurated by Jesus Christ. The law is described as the written code because it cannot and does not transform anyone. The reference to the work of the Spirit demonstrates that the obedience described in vv.26-27, and in v.7 and v.10, is the

result of the Spirit's work. Therefore, it is not the obedience of the unregenerate that is in view here, but rather the obedience of those who, by the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, have repented of their hard hearts (v.5), who have received the Holy Spirit, and who are being enabled by the Spirit to live a new life characterised by obedience to God.

Throughout the chapter it has become increasingly clear that Paul has in view different levels of law-keeping and that in this last paragraph he is using circumcision in two senses. But what is this circumcision which can be credited to Gentiles without actual circumcision? And how is it that physical circumcision can be a means of transgressing the law? Paul's answer is that the circumcision God looks for is not an outward, visible cutting of the flesh, that the law is not to be thought of as fulfilled at that level. The circumcision that God looks for is the circumcision of the heart, exactly what the prophets had called for, see quotes from Deuteronomy 10:16 and Jeremiah 4:4 at v.5; and promised: <<The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live>> (Deuteronomy 30:6), and <<I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws>> (Ezekiel 36:26-27). This is something Gentiles had given greater evidence of (v.15), something that could be fully accomplished only by the Spirit of God.

With this last phrase, Paul begins to construct his answer to the question 'How is the law to be properly carried out, fulfilled? Paul will answer this in detail later in the letter. It is already clear, however, that unlike the prophets in their criticism of the culture, Paul looks for a circumcision of the heart that completely replaces the physical rite and does not merely complement it, for a law-keeping, which can be completely independent of so much of the law: the ritual law; which Jews regarded as fundamental, with all the authority of Moses behind them.

But not only is it the law and circumcision that Paul seeks to remove from the domain of Jewish national pride and self-assurance; even the title 'Jew' itself comes into radical question. In a final confirmation of what had become increasingly evident throughout, that Paul is attacking a concept of law-keeping, which was tightly tied to a membership of the Jewish nation. With what we could call 'national righteousness' comes this explicit association of 'Jew', 'circumcision', and 'written code'. Paul will not allow this false understanding of God's covenant righteousness to retain even the title 'Jew'. Not only is the requirement of circumcision to be properly redefined which renders the outward rite unnecessary, but the very name 'Jew' is to be properly redefined also, as one whose Jewishness is dependent, not on what spectators can see and approve, but on what God alone can see and approve, i.e. the hidden secrets of the heart.

With this final thrust, Paul's readers would recognise once again that he was not turning his back on, far less rejecting, all these fundamental elements of Jewish self-understanding. On the contrary, he was affirming them and claiming them anew so that Jew first and also Gentile could appropriate them as something eschatologically fresh from God, but at the deeper level previously called for and hitherto promised, of the heart and by the Spirit, and now at last a present possibility and reality for those listening to his words in the congregations of Rome.