

FPFWC Christian Development



Love Completes, Law Falls Short

September 2023

Fall Quarter

September 30, 2023

Lesson #4 – Inward and Outward

SCRIPTURE TEXT – Romans 2:12-24, 28-29

ICE BREAKERS-

1. What makes a person a true Christian?
2. How can we know what is right?

Key Verse: “He is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.”—Romans 2:29

LESSON BACKGROUND –

Paul wrote the letter to the church in Rome in about AD 58, near the end of his third missionary journey. He had not visited Rome but hoped to do so in the near future (Romans 1:10). Despite this lack of firsthand familiarity, Paul was quite knowledgeable about issues causing dissent in the church of Rome. Conflict between Christians of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds was one of these issues. This may have been sharpened by the expulsion of all Jews from the city through an edict issued by Emperor Claudius in AD 49 (see Acts 18:2).

By the time Paul wrote, Claudius was dead, and Jews had returned to Rome. They included Jewish Christians. Gentile Christians had necessarily assumed leading roles in the church at Rome while the Jewish Christians were gone. We speculate that Paul knew that some of the returnees had attempted to assert their previous authority. In so doing, they may have elevated Jewish Christians above Gentile Christians. Circumcision, a sign of the old covenant, may have become a flash point in this conflict.

For the Hebrew people, circumcision began with Abraham (Genesis 17) as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham. That was in about 2000 BC. About 550 years later, circumcision of male babies was established (codified) to occur when the baby was eight days old (Leviticus 12:3). This tradition began with Abraham and his son Isaac (Genesis 21:4). The God-given instructions to Abraham seem to have presumed that the man knew what circumcision was, thus implying that circumcision was practiced by others before him. The antiquity of circumcision outside of Judaism was confirmed in 2021 when scientists “digitally unwrapped” the intact mummy of Pharaoh Amenhotep I (reigned about 1525–1504 BC), discovering that he had been circumcised.

In Paul's day of the first century AD, neither the Romans nor the Greeks practiced circumcision. Greeks viewed circumcision as an intentional marring or mutilation of the ideal body. Prohibition of the practice had been a notable factor in the Maccabean Revolt, which began in 167 BC (see the nonbiblical 1 Maccabees 1:60–61; 2:45–46; 2 Maccabees 6:7–10). Paul addressed the implications of the circumcision issue at length in the book of Galatians. But he also did so in Romans 2—today's lesson.

LESSON COMMENTARY

Romans 2:12–24 (MBC): For (v. 12) introduces Paul's explanation about God impartially judging all people on the basis of their deeds. Sinful actions make one liable to judgment, whether that one has the law or not (v. 13).

2:14–16. For (v. 14) signals that Paul gives the basis for maintaining that a Gentile without the law of Moses will perish in God's judgment. Based upon the natural circumstances of their birth, Gentiles do not have the law, but sometimes do instinctively the things of the Law, probably a reference to its moral requirements (e.g., loving one's neighbor; not bearing false witness) rather than the ceremonial aspects (sacrificing a red heifer). When those who do not have the law sometimes do some of the things prescribed by the law of Moses (the work of the Law, v. 15), they are a law to themselves, i.e., Gentiles indicate that they have their own moral code that overlaps with the law. God created humanity with a sense of right and wrong (cf. 1:32), and while Adam's fall damaged that, it did not erase it altogether. One's moral code may be as rudimentary as "treat everyone fairly" or "be nice to everyone." That moral code is an imperfect reflection of the morality God instilled in humankind, seen most clearly in the law. The problem is that no one lives up to whatever moral code he or his culture approves. As a result, their conscience bears witness to how well they have kept their own moral code, and will accuse or defend them on the day of judgment. Each one's conscience will say, "You kept your moral standards when you did this and this ..." But the conscience will also say, "You broke it here and here and here!" God knows the secrets of men, i.e., what their conscience tells them, and He will use these accusatory thoughts as evidence for condemnation on the day of judgment.

Although Gentiles do not have the OT law, they are still sinners and will still face condemnation from God. There are some who claim that God would give eternal life to someone who never hears about Jesus, as long as that person responds correctly to the light of God in creation, is sincere in his own religion, and is kind to other people. But Paul indicates otherwise. Such a Gentile is still a sinner, even on the basis of his own moral norms, and as a sinner will experience God's judgment and wrath.

2:17–24. Paul begins to turn his attention to the sinfulness of those in covenant with God, the Jewish people. He noted the special privileges the Jewish people enjoyed (vv. 17–20), but also their failure to live up to their privileges. Paul's point is not that every single Jew has stolen or committed adultery, but rather that the Jewish people as a whole (and the whole consists in the individual parts) have acted with such sinfulness that they disqualified themselves from being used by God to enlighten the world. Worse yet, by their sinfulness, they served to dishonor

God (v. 23). The same thing can be said about Gentiles who profess to be Christians, but live scandalous lives. They harm God's reputation now as much as unbelieving Jews did then.

25–29 (MBC): For (v. 28) begins an explanation as to why being circumcised does not guarantee salvation. Here only in chap. 2 does Paul refer to believers, in this case exclusively Jewish believers, and his point is to argue that being right with God comes as He performs spiritual surgery upon the heart, not as one complies with the letter of the law, by undergoing circumcision in the flesh (v. 29). Note that Paul is speaking only of true, believing Jews in these verses. Gentile believers are not in view, and the idea that Gentile Christians are the new Israel is foreign to this section.

LESSON NUGGET – Am I hiding behind religion? The Jews boasted of their law, but it could not save them. External rituals do not guarantee internal changes. God searches the heart. What does He see in my heart?

Sources: Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary, and The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary