

The True Jew – Romans 2:17-29

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Bridge Out

1. A major tragedy occurred on Interstate 35 near Minneapolis last Wednesday evening.
2. A large section of the bridge crossing the Mississippi River collapsed as dozens of cars were crossing.
3. They plunged 65 ft into murky waters along with hundreds of tons of debris.
4. Divers will be working a long time to locate & recover all the vehicles.
5. As soon as the bridge collapsed, emergency teams went to work.
 - a. One of the reasons the tragedy *wasn't worse* was because many of the responders recently completed drills on how to deal with just such an event.
 - b. The highway department immediately closed the road & posted signs about the danger ahead.
 - c. How *foolish & negligent* it would have been if they *hadn't* sealed the road & posted warnings.

B. Road Out

1. That's what the Apostle Paul is doing here in Romans 2; he's posting *warning signs* saying *Route Good Works to Eternal Life* is out.
2. He knows there are many who are traveling that route, thinking they'll earn heaven by being good.
3. So he posts a sign & places a barrier across that path, directing people to the *detour* God has made.

C. To the Jews

1. Let's quickly recap what we've looked at so far.
2. In ch. 1, Paul shows how *sinner*s have no excuse for their rejection of God.
3. In the first half of ch. 2 he shows how *moralists* also have no excuse because it's obvious they'll never be good *enough*.
4. In the last half of ch. 2, he indicts the *religious*, those who considered themselves *spiritually privileged*.

II. TEXT

A. V. 17-20

¹⁷Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, ¹⁸and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, ¹⁹and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, ²⁰an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law.

1. Paul's already dealt with Gentiles; now he turns to deal with his own people.
2. As a religious Jew who'd been trained by Rabbi Gamaliel, one of the greatest teachers in Jewish history, Paul knew well how Jews thought.
3. They had supreme confidence their unique status as God's Chosen People.
4. They believed heaven was guaranteed as long as they held on to the things that *made* them distinctly Jewish.
5. Paul briefly lists some of those things.
 - a. **They were called "Jews."**
 - 1) The word means "praise" & had become a title they took pride in.
 - 2) Many around the Roman Empire added it to their name.
 - 3) Today, some people will spell their name as John Smith, *Ph.D.*, Mary Smith, *MD.*, r Fred Smith, *Esq.* Some Jews spelled their names, Simeon, *Jew*.
 - 4) They were *proud* of their ethnic identity & its connection to God.

- b. **They rested on the law** – meaning they thought just *possessing* the 10 Commandments was a sign of God’s favor.
- c. **They made their boast in God.** - It was one of their defining marks that they boasted God had chosen *them* & **NOT** Gentiles; & they never ceased reminding Gentiles of that.
- d. **They knew God’s will & what was excellent, because** they’d been given the Word of God by Moses & the prophets.
 - 1) Not only did they have the 10 Commandments; their entire religious, civil & social life was governed by God’s Word.
 - 2) When it came to philosophy, morality, & ethics, they had a huge advantage on everyone else.
- 6. Because of all this, *generally* the Jews thought of themselves as morally, spiritually, religiously & socially better than others.
- 7. Of course there were individual exceptions, but for the most part, the Jewish people fancied themselves enlightened instructors who could lead Gentiles out of darkness into light.
- 8. Paul does a brilliant job of identifying this mindset because at one time he’d *held* it.
- 9. But he also knew the *inconsistencies* that went along with it – he’d seen those firsthand too.
- 10. So he turns his pen to list them . . .

B. Vs. 21-24

²¹You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? ²²You who say, “Do not commit adultery,” do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

- 1. The problem of failing to practice what you preach is true in every generation.
- 2. Even the *religious* of Jesus’ & Paul’s day were *hypocrites*.
- 3. They taught *stealing* was wrong, but built loopholes into their interpretations of the law so they could *cheat* others when conducting business.
- 4. Adultery was considered a terrible sin because it broke the sacred covenant of marriage yet the Talmud accuses 3 of Israel’s prominent rabbis with adultery.
- 5. And while Jews had a strong aversion to idolatry, prohibiting *any* contact with them, some were breaking into pagan shrines & stealing their treasures.
- 6. You can guess what this kind of two-faced hypocrisy did to their reputation among Gentiles when their piety was revealed for the *sham* it was.

²³You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law?

²⁴For “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,” as it is written.

- 7. Paul quotes Isaiah 52:5, when God told Israel their self-righteous hypocrisy had brought shame on them & dishonor to Him.
- 8. It was a time when Gentiles looked at the Jews who *claimed* to be the Chosen People of a Holy God & wagged their head in disgust because of the abominations they were practicing.
- 9. Paul applies those 700 year old words to his readers.
 - a. They boast they’re *better* than everyone else because they possess God’s Word & Law.
 - b. But their boast is revealed as the empty thing it is by the *reaction* of Gentiles.
 - c. They aren’t being *drawn to* God by the attractive example of His people.
 - d. They’re being *repelled* because what they saw & heard *disgusted* them.
- 10. Roman writers from that time tell us that for the most part Gentiles *disliked* Jews because Jews treated Gentiles with *utter contempt*.
 - a. Tacitus said that while the Jews showed great compassion & care for one another, they showed complete disdain for everyone else.

- b. The Jews of Alexandria even made a *pact* that they would show *no kindness* to a non-Jew.
- c. No one whose attitude to others is *contempt* can be a missionary.
- d. Contempt is *repellant*, not attractive.

C. Applied

1. While Paul directs this at the self-righteous, religious Jew of that day, the *principle* behind it applies to *us—today*.
2. We read ch. 1 & *agree* whole-heartedly with Paul’s indictment of vile sinners who reject God & pursue an evil lifestyle.
3. We affirm his indictment of moralists in the first half of ch. 2; people who think they can *earn* their way to heaven.
4. But we’re *confident* in *our* identity as non-denominational, Evangelical, born-again, conservative, Protestants.
 - a. We *boast* in our knowledge of God, gained through a devotion to His *Word*.
 - b. We know *right doctrine* about all kinds of stuff; salvation, the last days, the Holy Spirit, church government.
 - c. Our *worship* is contemporary & heart-felt.
5. The *challenge* these verses pose is to consider if we’ve grown *over-confident* in these things.
 - a. Has our confidence turned into arrogance?
 - b. Do we fancy ourselves *better* than others?
 - c. Do we look down *long, straight, pious noses* at others because they aren’t as enlightened as us?
 - d. Let me put it this way: *Is our LIFESTYLE attractive – or our ATTITUDE repellant?*
6. You see, *true* spirituality, *genuine* godliness will never express itself in contempt & disdain for others.
 - a. The word ‘godly’ means “like-God.”
 - b. And God is LOVE. Yes, He is also holy. But His holiness isn’t a *harsh piety* that drives others off; it’s a glorious beauty that *draws*.
7. When God became Man in the Person of Jesus, we get a perfect picture of what true godliness looks like & does.
 - a. Jesus never treated sinners with contempt. He loved them & did so in a way THEY KNEW IT!
 - b. His *self-righteous* enemies the Pharisees called Him the “*Friend* of sinners.”
 - c. Rather than judgmental & condemning, Jesus showed them love & compassion & won them.
 - d. It was their new relationship with Him that moved them to forsake their sin because they realized it got in the way of knowing Him *more*.
 - e. Knowing Him was now *more* important & rewarding than anything their sin had ever done for them, so they gladly put it away.
8. What the merely religious Jews of Paul’s time missed was the simple truth that *genuine godliness is marked by love*; first for God, then for others, *all* others!
9. What was true then is true now – the fruit of the Spirit is still love.
10. So we ask – Just as Jews had a reputation throughout the Roman Empire – What’s the reputation of *Christians* today?
 - a. Are we known as godly & loving – or is our reputation less attractive?
 - b. As Evangelical Christians, are we known for a devotion to God that compels us to love others & win them to faith through an *excellent lifestyle*?
 - c. Or are we known more for the *political* stands we take, angrily denouncing certain people & groups, consigning them to hell while priding ourselves in our confidence of heaven?
 - d. While our most visible leaders are exposed as greedy, adulterous hypocrites?

11. Christian – Heed well these words: They’re for you & me.
 - a. The goal of a disciple is to be just like his/her rabbi. → Are you a “*friend* of sinners”?
 - b. Or would a more accurate title be, “*despiser* of sinners”?
 - c. Is the beauty of your *lifestyle attracting* people **TO** God, or is your *attitude so stinky*, you’re driving people away?
12. Do you know why Christianity spread so rapidly in the first couple centuries?
 - a. We wouldn’t have expected it to because it was persecuted harshly.
 - b. The Gospel was considered a *scandal* because its central belief was in a man who’d been crucified, the most shameful form of death imaginable.
 - c. Yet by the end of the 2nd Century, the Gospel had spread to nearly *every* corner of the Empire, & beyond!
 - d. The reason why was because those first believers understood *it was all about love*.
 - e. *No one can argue* with a *life transformed* by the Love of God!
13. The early church conquered the world by love.
14. The modern church will only succeed in its mission if it does the same.
 - a. We’ll not transform society in the courts or legislature.
 - b. The culture war will not be won by electing a president.
 - c. We’ll not see an end to abortion & perversion through angry debates –
 - d. It’s **ONLY** by the love of God that we’ll prevail – a love for Him that *produces* a love for others.
 - e. It’s that love *alone* that will change hearts, changes minds, change lives.

D. Vs. 25-27

²⁵For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. ²⁶Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? ²⁷And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you who, even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law?

1. The Jews possessed what they thought was a *spiritual secret weapon*.
 - a. It was an ace up their sleeve,
 - b. A trump card that served as definitive proof of their favored status with God. **Circumcision**.
2. It was the mark God gave Abraham back in Genesis that would identify his descendants as members of the covenant.
3. By Paul’s day for many Jews, circumcision had taken on a magical aura.
4. So much so that some of the rabbis said Abe stood at the gate to hell doing inspections of all who entered there.
 - a. If a Jew *mistakenly* showed up, he’d recognize him by circumcision as one of his descendants
 - b. & send him on his way to heaven where he belonged.
5. To people who put so much confidence in circumcision, what Paul says here would be earth-shattering!
6. But his logic is *unassailable*.
 - a. If a circumcised Jew showed no regard for the *rest* of the law while an uncircumcised Gentile kept it,
 - b. Wouldn’t that mean circumcision *wasn’t as important* as they thought?
7. The point was: Circumcision was *supposed* to be an outward sign of an inner reality – that the Jews were in a covenant relationship with God.
 - a. That relationship was marked not just by circumcision but by obedience to *all* God’s Word.
 - b. So if a Gentile kept the law – what would that say about his/her relationship with God?

- c. Now – be clear that Paul is NOT saying anyone, Jew or Gentile keeps the law perfectly –
 - d. He made it clear in the first half of ch. 2 that **no one** does that.
 - e. He’s simply presenting a **hypothetical** to show his Jewish readers they can’t trust in circumcision as some kind of automatic entrance ticket to heaven.
8. God’s not fooled by outward religion, He looks on the heart.

E. Vs. 28-29

²⁸For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; ²⁹but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.

- 1. The *essence* of being a Jew was the special relationship God invited them into.
 - 2. Circumcision, the 10 Commandments, the Law & sacrifices – **all of it** – were simply *guidelines* for that covenant relationship.
 - a. They were meant to be assistants that would propel & enhance the relationship.
 - b. They were means to deepen it & keep it fresh & vital.
 - 3. But over the centuries the Jews had turned those things into **the main thing**.
 - 4. They turned their attention away from God to the practices & made them into empty religious rituals.
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5. Paul makes a subtle play on words in v. 29.

He is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; → whose praise is not from men but from God.

- 6. The word “Jew” comes from Judah, one of the tribes of Israel.
- 7. The name ‘Judah’ means ‘praise.’
- 8. So Paul makes a pun at the end of v. 29 that summarizes his point: When He says,

whose praise is not from men but from God

 We could substitute “Jew” for the word “praise” & read –

whose ‘Jew’ is not from men but from God.
- 9. In other words, it isn’t jumping through religious hoops that makes us right with God.
- 10. It’s a work He does by His Spirit & grace in our hearts.

III. CONCLUSION

A. Marriage

- 1. This is my wedding ring. I received it on May 17th, 1980 at a Baptist Church in Orange CA when Lynn & I stood before family & friends & entered into the sacred covenant of Marriage with one another.
 - a. This ring is a memorial, a reminder of that day & the promise made.
 - b. It speaks of a **living relationship** I enjoy with my wife **today**.
 - c. How tragic it would be if while living in the same house together for the last 27 years, I never talked to her, never enjoyed her personally; nor she, me.
 - d. But oh! I often **look** at my ring & **show** it to others, telling them of my great wife & our awesome marriage.
 - e. People see my ring when I’m out & around & know I’m married. Yeah, I’m a **married** man.
 - f. Many nights I get out the wedding album & flip through the pictures.
 - g. And I’m **faithful!** I never flirt with other women. Bumper sticker – “I Love my Wife”
 - h. I even **teach** others **how** to have a good marriage.
 - 1) I know all about how to communicate.
 - 2) How to keep romance alive.

- 3) And how to resolve conflict.
2. But the entire time I'm maintaining all these *forms* of marriage, I never actually **ENGAGE** in personal relationship with my wife.
 3. I may be able to fool others, even myself—but there's one person that knows the truth about my claim to having a great marriage – *my wife*.
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4. Chances are, you're not called a Jew; you're called a "Christian."
 - a. Even if you're *Jewish* – if you're a believer, you identify yourself as a "Christian."
 - b. And you observe the *forms* of your faith; church, communion, worship, baptism.
 5. Set all of that aside for a moment and consider this –

Are you enjoying God? • Is He enjoying you?
 6. Is there *real relationship happening*, real intimate communion – or is it just religion?