

ROMANS

GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS REVEALED

IT'S A MATTER OF THE HEART

Text: Romans 2:25-29

Main preaching point: Signs and sacraments like circumcision and baptism point to what saves; they are not the reality themselves.

INTRODUCTION:

In this closing section of Romans 2, Paul addresses an issue that may not seem relevant to us as Gentiles today, but in fact, it takes us to the heart of our need for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Beginning in verse 25, Paul pokes his finger into the chest of the Jew and addresses the one issue out of the Law that the Jew took most pride in, and that was *circumcision*. In these verses, Paul makes a distinction between *the false and true circumcision, the false and true believer*. And in doing so, the Apostle helps us understand the need for conversion by the Spirit through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Before we step into the house of this text, we need to build a front porch in our understanding of the meaning and purpose of circumcision. This thread of teaching about circumcision runs through the entire Bible, and to feel the force of what Paul is saying in Romans, we need to take a little journey through the Scriptures.

TOPICAL SURVEY OF CIRCUMCISION

What is circumcision all about? Let's unsort this Old Testament rite. There are three things we need to know.

- **First, circumcision was a sign.** It was a sign that pointed to God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17. The act of circumcision was not a new rite, for other nations practiced it in Abraham's time; but now God gave it *new importance* and *special meaning*. Circumcision signified that God set Abraham and his descendants apart for God's specific purposes. It was a sign of *separation*. However, the sign of circumcision pointed to something deeper than the outward sign of national identity.
- **Second, circumcision was a picture.** Just as baptism is a picture of identifying with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, circumcision was a picture of *what must happen in your heart*. It pictured the need for an internal circumcision of the heart. Circumcision is the cutting of the foreskin of the male organ. Just as the foreskin was cut with a very sharp knife signifying that this person is set apart for God—not in reality, but metaphorically—this is what must happen to every person's heart. Their heart must be pierced and cut to the core by the sharp two-edged sword of the Word of God and the Spirit of God. It is a picture of *the new birth*. *It is a biblical metaphor for regeneration and conversion*. Physical circumcision is a picture of spiritual circumcision that must take place.

- **Third, circumcision was an obligation.** It was not an option for the Jew. It was to be performed on every eight-day-old baby boy (*Lev.12:3*). It was an important act of obedience for parents; for if they did not obey God in the matter, their son would be cut off from His people (*Gen.17:14*). In Leviticus and Deuteronomy, Moses gives the law to a new generation about to enter the Promised Land.

This new generation had their bodies circumcised, but not their heart. So, Moses addressed this need in Deuteronomy 10:12ff.

- **Deuteronomy 10:12-16**—“Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to keep the LORD’s commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good? ¹⁴ Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the highest heavens, the earth and all that is in it. ¹⁵ Yet on your fathers did the LORD set His affection to love them, and He chose their descendants after them, *even you above all peoples, as it is this day.* ¹⁶ So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer.

An uncircumcised heart is also pictured as a stiff-neck—“*stiffen your neck no longer.*” It pictures an ox that would not submit to a master. When the master comes with a yoke to put it around the neck, the ox hunches its shoulders and tightens its neck stiff so that the yoke would not fit around the neck. That’s what it means to be *stiff-necked*—you will not submit to the yoke of your master. That’s what the unsaved person is like—you are stiff-necked, and you will not humble yourself and submit to the authority and Lordship of God. You refuse to turn from sin and believe and surrender to Christ. You need to have your heart *pierced* and with that piercing comes conviction of sin—the painful, excruciating sorrow that you have offended God—and you mourn over the painful awareness of your sin, and then you find relief in the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

It was not enough to have the physical mark; God required a new heart and a yielded, submissive life in order to be a true Jew or a real believer.

- **Deuteronomy 30:6**—“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, so that you may live.”

Here we are shown something about the sovereignty of God to perform this work. Man is responsible for it, but God must do it. Three times in this verse the word “*heart*” is used. This issue is a matter of the *heart*. And what is the result of having your heart circumcised? Moses goes on to say in the middle of verse 6, “*to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.*” No one loves God until they are born again. And if your heart is not circumcised, you’re spiritually dead. You have no spiritual or eternal life. You’re separated from God. This explains the necessity of a heart circumcision. It represents being set apart unto God in the new birth by the Holy Spirit, and in conversion.

- **Jeremiah 4:4**—“Circumcise yourselves to the LORD
And remove the foreskins of your heart.”

Jeremiah is speaking to adults who had already been circumcised physically as infants, so when he says, “*Circumcise yourselves to the LORD,*” he’s not talking about getting the same physical surgical procedure. He says, “*remove the foreskins of your heart.*” The heart is the issue. Now as an adult, it is not enough that you had physical circumcision as an infant. That will not get you into the kingdom of God. When this heart circumcision takes place, it will “*remove the foreskin of your heart.*” This pictures a heart that has become so thick-headed and callous. It has become insensitive and resistant toward God.

But when this heart circumcision takes place, it removes the foreskin of your heart, meaning it removes your sinful resistance toward God. It removes unbelief. It removes callousness so that you believe and set yourselves apart unto God.

Now what if you do not have your heart circumcised? Listen to the second half of verse 4,

- "Men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem,
Or else My wrath will go forth like fire
And burn with none to quench it,
Because of the evil of your deeds."

It is the foreskin of your heart that is causing you to live such a sinful and unbelieving life. And in order to be saved and escape the wrath of God is to have that rhinoceros hide of a thick heart cut by the Word of God by the power of the Holy Spirit.

- **Jeremiah 9:23-25**—Thus says the LORD, "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; ²⁴ but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things," declares the LORD.
²⁵ "Behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "that I will punish all who are circumcised and yet uncircumcised—"

How can you be both? *Circumcised* and yet *uncircumcised*. Because you can be *physically circumcised* yet not *spiritually circumcised*. You can be a member of a church and not a member of the kingdom. You can be baptized and not be saved. Judas was a member of the Twelve, but a child of the devil. Having physical circumcision brings no saving reality in one's life. You must have spiritual circumcision.

Who does this apply to? Look at verse 26,

- **Jeremiah 9:26**—Egypt and Judah, and Edom and the sons of Ammon, and Moab and all those inhabiting the desert who clip the hair on their temples; for all the nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised of heart."

Everyone needs conversion. Jesus said in Matthew 18:3, "*Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.*" Many go through the ritual, but they do not possess reality (Cf. *Ezek.44:7; Act 7:51*).

Keep in mind, this is a front porch into this important doctrine, but as you will see, it will drop so much light on the passage in Romans 2.

- **Galatians 6:15**—For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.

The only thing that matters is that you are born again (*2 Cor.5:17*). In Galatia, false teachers called Judaizers had infiltrated the church and were preaching a false Gospel insisting that to be saved, one had to be circumcised and come back under the law. And Paul declared: that is a false Gospel. Let the person who believes that be cursed, given over to damnation.

- **Galatians 5:1-8**—It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. ² Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you.

³ And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. ⁴ You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. ⁵ For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love. ⁷ You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? ⁸ This persuasion *did* not *come* from Him who calls you.

This subject resurfaced in the early church again and again.

- **Ephesians 2:11**—Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called “Uncircumcision” by the so-called “Circumcision,” *which* is performed in the flesh by human hands—

Paul is using sarcasm. That which is performed in the flesh by human hands is not the real circumcision, but the real circumcision that God wants is not performed by hands in the flesh, but in the heart by the Spirit of God.

Let’s walk next door to the Book of Philippians.

- **Philippians 3:1-3**—Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things *again* is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you. ² Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; ³ 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 (*Cf. vv.4-5, 8-9*).

If all you have is *doctrine, membership, activities, or ministry*, but you don’t have a new, circumcised heart, your doctrine, membership, activities, and ministry mean nothing. True believers have a pierced, circumcised heart (*Acts 2:37; Phil.3:2-3; Col.2:11-13*). When you come into the kingdom, it is as if you’ve come out of open-heart surgery, where God has removed the heart of stone, and given you a heart of flesh that is *sensitive to His voice* and *responsive to His Word*.

Here is the last thread before we tie the knot in Romans 2.

- **Colossians 2:11**—and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ [came from and performed by Christ].

This teaching of circumcision is not merely an Old Testament teaching of the law, but it is still in the books and clarified. Paul is giving four pictures about the believer’s new life in Christ in which we’ve been made complete. The first picture is in verse 11—of circumcision illustrating regeneration. The second picture is in verse 12—of baptism illustrating resurrection. The third picture is in verse 13—of forgiveness illustrating reconciliation. And the fourth picture is in verse 14—of atonement illustrating righteousness.

What does this mean for us today? Many people are a part of the New Testament church who are still trusting in religious activities and rituals, and the message is the same for us. There is no salvation in membership. There is no salvation in water baptism. There is no salvation in taking the Lord’s Supper. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are pictures that signify something. It is still a matter of the heart—and the heart of the matter is that you must be born again. God is after your heart. If the heart is right, the life will be right, but if the heart is wrong, the life will be wrong (*Prov.4:23; Matt.22:32ff*).

Has your heart been circumcised? As you come to the Lord’s table and go about your duties today, remember, it all begins in your heart and then proceeds to the exterior.

Your outward actions are important, but only if there is the reality of the heart under it. Now we are ready to step into the house of this text and follow Paul's meaning much better.

EXPOSITION:

Paul points out in Romans 2:25-29, physical circumcision is of no value in the judgment because we are all still transgressors. What we really need is not that which is outward, but the circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, through faith in Christ. The outline is simple and now it should come to light. I need to do very little interpreting now to bring this meal to the table.

A. THE CIRCUMCISED (v.25)

²⁵ For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.

The only way you "*practice the Law*" is to have your heart circumcised. And the only way to have a new heart is to be born again. Those who have their hearts circumcised do not practice the law perfectly, but they do practice it habitually and continually—because you have a new heart.

But if your heart has not been changed, and there is no life changed, then to be circumcised physically—or to join a church or to be baptized—is of no value. It is as though you are uncircumcised or you only got wet. That's the argument.

B. THE UNCIRCUMCISED (vv.26-27)

²⁶ So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?

The only way for the uncircumcised man to keep the law is for him to have experienced a spiritual circumcision that has given him new birth and new life. But now the argument is, though the Gentile has never been circumcised, if he keeps the requirements of the law—not perfectly, but habitually and continually—he knows the reality of what circumcision pictured. It is as if he is circumcised because reality is in his life.

²⁷ And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of *the Law* and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law?

The answer is yes. His very life will judge. In reality, it is God who judges, but the new heart and life of the believer stand in judgment of those who profess to have life but have no reality of the life they claim to possess.

C. THE TRUE CIRCUMCISED (vv.28-29)

This is the point. Hopefully, now the clouds have lifted.

²⁸ For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh.

He is not a Jew who is only one by physical birth. He is not a completed Jew. Nor is (spiritual) circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. The reality is not a physical thing.

First, negative denial (verse 28), now positive assertion (verse 29). In other words, there can be no misunderstanding about this.

²⁹ But he is a Jew [completed; a real believer] who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, [how] by the Spirit, not by the letter [requirements kept by the will]; and his praise [pun is intended because the word Jew means praise] is not from men, but from God.

CONCLUSION:

Since we have seen the macro big picture and the micro arguments of the text, we can apply this rightly if we understand and respond to these closing applications.

1. Knowledge alone—even the highest spiritual and moral principles—does not win God’s approval.
2. Membership in the visible church does not guarantee that we have obtained the favor of God.
3. Sacraments either of the Old or New Testament periods save no one.
4. If we are to be saved, it must be by the Person and work of Jesus Christ alone, applied to us by the Father through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

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