

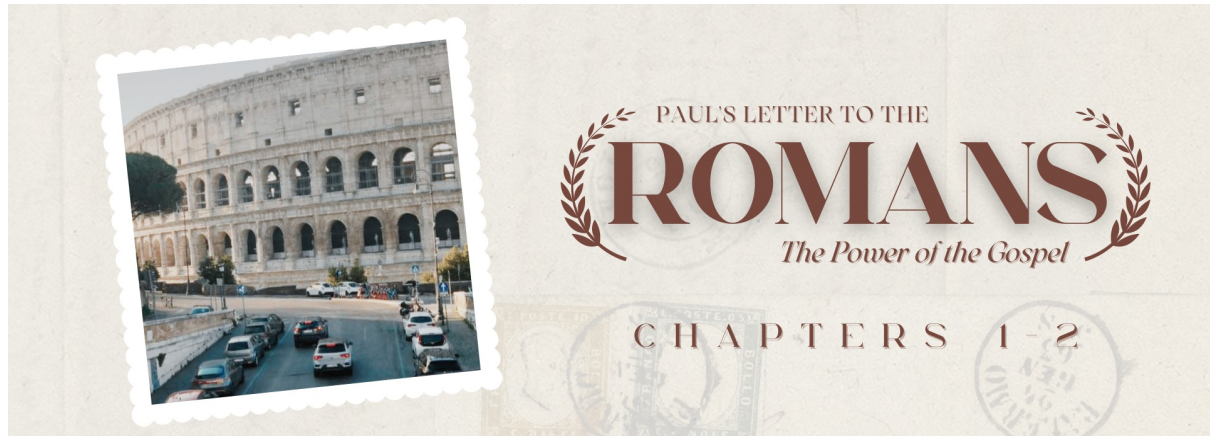
Reality vs. Symbols

Romans 2:17-29

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Part of Paul's Letter to the Romans Chapters 1-2

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The Jews considered themselves God's special chosen people, and they believed that that status had earned them privileges over and above any other people.

God told the Jews over and over that He selected them because they were actually among the least significant of peoples, yet His selection *made them special*.

For you are a holy people, who belong to the LORD your God. Of all the people on earth, the LORD your God has chosen you to be his own special treasure. The LORD did not set his heart on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other nations, for you were the smallest of all nations! Rather, it was simply that the LORD loves you, and he was keeping the oath he had sworn to your ancestors. That is why the LORD rescued you with such a strong hand from your slavery and from the oppressive hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

—Deuteronomy 7:6-8 (NLT)

Paul is saying the Jews misunderstood their actual role, believing they were inherently special, which was why many of them believed God had selected them, and this mistaken attitude often led them to become arrogant and self-righteous.

The temptation for people has always been to turn the “faith” into a moral code, versus a relationship with the Creator God through His Son Jesus.

“utopia” (Greek) = “no place” or “nowhere”

God didn’t first give the Law in order to create a utopia by using the Law to bring people into a right relationship with Him.

God first established the relationship, making a covenant with Abraham and others after him, and, from that relationship, God would *eventually* give to Moses the Law to show God’s people *how* people in a right relationship with God would then attempt to live their lives, with God’s help.

A problem is that people get the cart before the horse and start to see the Law as a way to earn their right standing with God.

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.

—Ephesians 2:8-9 (NLT)

There is a subtle and insidious shift that happens to us where we begin to believe we’re capable of saving *ourselves*.

There’s just something in each of us that drives us to want to justify ourselves, prove ourselves, to do it ourselves, even if in lifting ourselves up we push others down.

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—you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”

—Romans 2:17-24 (ESV)

The Law is good, and it teaches us God’s Will, but it’s *not* a method to get into His good graces - it’s a picture of what righteous living looks like, but even more, a reminder to us that no matter how hard we try, we keep on falling short in our own efforts.

After the reception of the Law, a second major distinctive of the Jews was the practice of male circumcision.

The Jews had turned circumcision into a mark of entry into salvation, versus a symbol of a relationship.

For 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. 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.

—Romans 2:25-29 (ESV)

Paul makes it clear that being a true Jew is not about

outward symbols but an inward disposition of the heart that reveals itself in how the person lives.

True circumcision is not a mark made by human hands but by the Holy Spirit, and it was understood that way all the way back in the Old Testament, even if Jews forgot.

And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

—Deuteronomy 30:6 (ESV)

Observance of the Law and circumcision have value only when they reflect the person's heart.

Baptism is a symbol of a transformed or circumcised heart, which only God knows and sees.

The Law is part of God's Scripture, whose writing was inspired by the Holy Spirit, and it is the work of the Spirit that transforms our hearts, so it's all by grace that we are saved, and that's praiseworthy in the eyes of God because that understanding fulfills what the Law requires but cannot produce.

Paul is stressing to the Christians in Rome - both Jewish and Gentile Christians - that because the Christian faith is all about a relationship with God through Christ by the power of the Spirit, our games never fool God.

The beauty of this faith is that the ground is always level at the cross!

Next Week: **Summer Kids Club Sunday** - one service at 10:30 AM!

Resources for Romans

- [RightNow Media](#) (Don't have an account? [Sign up](#) for Right Now

Media - it's FREE!)

- [RightNow Media Scripture Series](#)
- [Book of Romans Summary \(Part 1\)](#)
- [Book of Romans Summary \(Part 2\)](#)
- [The Bible Project](#)
 - [Book of Romans Summary \(Part 1\)](#)
 - [Book of Romans Summary \(Part 2\)](#)