
“Circumcised Hearts”

ROMANS 2:25-29

NOVEMBER 20, 2022

PASTOR BRIAN SMITH

WILDWOOD CHURCH

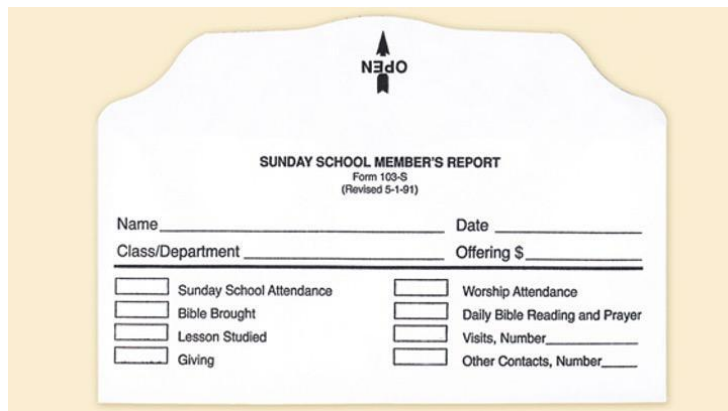
EAST MOLINE, ILLINOIS

BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

Religious ritual detached from relational affection for God is nothing. The Jews thought that if they were circumcised in the flesh, they were guaranteed entrance into Heaven. Today, Christians sometimes feel the same about baptism or other rituals they perform. In this week’s passage, Paul corrects this false notion and reminds his Jewish readers that it’s always been about the heart, never merely about the ritual act. Christians today would do well to remember that doing the things is not the same as loving the Lord.

INTRODUCTION

As I prepared this week, I recalled something from my childhood. I remember seeing giving envelopes as a kid. Families could order boxes of them, so they had one for each week. The one that I recall had several blocks on it and I was able to find a picture of one similar to it online. Notice the many blocks to check! Imagine how good it feels to check each one of those and then to know that someone, maybe even the pastor, was going to see it!



Now I want to give the good folks who designed this envelope the benefit of the doubt. To the extent that this envelope challenges sincere Christians to examine their life each week and check their heart, I think it’s great! But, what I have experienced is that many people tend toward box-checking rather than heart-checking. They tend toward ritual and away from relationship.

In the words of Solomon, there is nothing new under the sun. Paul recognized this problem even in the church at Rome 2000 years ago. Jewish converts prided themselves in their circumcision and relied on the presumption that this ritual is what saved them.

First of all, where did circumcision come from? Paul says in *Romans 4:11*, “He [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.” What did Paul mean by “righteousness...by faith?”

We find out answer to this in Genesis 15. *“And he brought him outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” Genesis 15:5-6*

Abraham was an old man with no children, but he believed God was able to do what was otherwise impossible. This faith is what Paul referred to in Romans 4. Abraham believed God and circumcision was a symbol of his righteousness he had by faith. The sign of circumcision was a visible sign that Abraham had been called by God to become a special, set apart people. It was a sign given by God. There was a problem Paul needed to address, though, in the Roman church as it related to circumcision.

Daniel Doriani explains, “From roughly 175 to 165 BC a violent Hellenistic ruler named Antiochus ruled Judea. Whatever his motives, Antiochus attempted to impose the Greek way of life on Israel and to eradicate expressions of conservative Judaism, especially temple sacrifices and circumcision. From that time on, circumcision became *the* sign of loyalty to God and covenant. Eventually Jewish rabbis said that no circumcised man would go to hell and that circumcision would save the nation. In Paul's day many Jews boasted in circumcision and construed it as ‘a certain passport to salvation.’”

Paul intended to correct this error. Let's read and then dive in verse-by-verse.

ROMANS 2:25-29

²⁵ For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. ²⁶ So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? ²⁷ Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. ²⁸ For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. ²⁹ 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.

IF YOU OBEY THE LAW

Verse 25 reads, **For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law...** Being physically marked in the flesh has **value** so long as the life one leads is consistent with the Law for which the mark corresponds. It is an advantage. It means you belong to the covenant people of God. *“I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies.” Genesis 22:17*

The Israelites bore a mark in their skin symbolizing that they had been chosen by God's grace to be His set apart and holy people. But while circumcision is symbolic of God's covenant with His people, it is not the essence of the covenant. The essence of the covenant is love for God and love for neighbor which necessarily leads to perfect obedience to the Law. *“And if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth.” Deuteronomy 28:1*

IF YOU BREAK THE LAW

Paul reminds them of the other side of the promise. **but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.** God had warned that if His people break the covenant they would be cut off. *“But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.” Deuteronomy 28:15*

If you do not live up to the Law, it makes no difference whether you're marked in the flesh or not. The mark of circumcision was to be an outward expression of an internal commitment to the Lord. It was to be a visible reminder of their identity as God's chosen people. But where the internal commitment is void, Paul says, **your circumcision becomes uncircumcision**. The outward is meaningless when it is not reflective of the inward.

MEANINGLESS RITUALS

Outward religious rituals mean nothing when they are not the expression of a genuine heart commitment to the Lord. Sort of like baptism. Baptism becomes un-baptism when it is merely an empty ritual. When it is not reflective of a heart that has been changed by the Lord, baptism is nothing.

As with Abraham, righteousness comes by faith. "Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness." Likewise, we know that baptism is an expression of our faith in Jesus. Baptism does not save, but it declares to the watching world that we are saved because we put our faith in Christ.

Thus, baptism is only of value if we have faith in Christ. It's not about just going under water. It's about proclaiming through the baptism process that we are united with Christ by faith. We are identifying ourselves with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection.

What a warning to Christians today not to rely upon our baptism for assurance of salvation any more than the Jews of Paul's day should rely on circumcision.

REGARDED AS CIRCUMCISION

Paul continues in **verse 26 So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?** If a gentile who is uncircumcised keeps the **precepts of the law**, that is to say, he loves the Lord His God with all His heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loves his neighbor as himself, won't that demonstrate that he is actually walking with the Lord as His child?

Will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Won't God accept the man *as if* he were circumcised? The answer is resoundingly yes, Gentiles have proven such for millennia.

Don't you know that the condition of the heart, which works its way out into the character of the life, is more important than the one-time religious ritual you performed, or worse yet, that was performed for you without your choice, as in the case of circumcision?

EXHIBIT A

Verse 27 reads, **Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law.** This is hyperbolic language. He's saying, "The gentiles will show you up." The people who don't have the privilege of being raised in covenant community with God, who haven't been given the written law, will prove to you that you never really knew the Lord at all.

It's not that gentiles will sit in judgment of the Jews, but rather that they will serve as evidence of what genuine conversion and devotion to God really looks like. They will be "exhibit A" of what the Lord desired in His people.

The Jews who **have the written code and circumcision** demonstrate their presumption because they **break the law** and yet still believe their circumcision is of any value. But the **physically uncircumcised** who **keeps the law**, proverbially speaking, demonstrates their heart for the Lord even without the outward sign.

CIRCUMCISED HEARTS

Paul continues in **verses 28-29** **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.**

The nominal Jew is one who looks the part and has checked the blocks. He does the things. Whereas the true Jew is a Jew **inwardly**. That is, he loves the Lord. That's the contrast. The one does the things. The other loves the Lord.

Circumcision of the flesh is visible to man. Circumcision of the heart is visible only to God, who knows the secrets of our hearts. Circumcision in the flesh is external ritual, while what counts is circumcision of the heart which is affected **by the Spirit** and not **by the letter**. Anyone can do religious things and follow rules, albeit imperfectly. But only the Holy Spirit can change a person's heart.

God has always sought circumcision of the heart. It was never about mere outward signs. It was always about a heart change. *"Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn."* Deuteronomy 10:16 and again, *"Circumcise yourselves to the Lord; remove the foreskin of your hearts."* Jeremiah 4:4

To nominal Jews and nominal Christians alike, the Law is merely a letter to be followed, even if partially ignored. It does nothing to change the affections of their heart.

Real circumcision has to do with one's heart, not one's body. It's not one's commitment to religious ritual, religious conviction, religious morality, nor religious knowledge that counts. It is a heart-change that is wrought by the **Spirit** of God, not by the **letter** of the Law.

What the Lord seeks is not people who pride themselves in their own religious rituals and commitment to the letter of the law, but people who humble themselves in earnest relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ made possible by His Holy Spirit, who, by the way, inspired the Word of God and will guide us to it and through it. We can count on that! If the spirit isn't moving us to faithfulness to the Word, it's not the Holy Spirit.

Paul says that the one who with a circumcised heart gets **praise is not from man but from God**. Even if his fellow Jews or gentiles cannot look upon us and gush over his external piety, **God praises him**.

IT'S TIME FOR A HEART-CHECK

Religious people cover their empty and darkened hearts with the veneer of piety all the while they lack interest in things that really matter to the Lord – like personal holiness and sanctification, like love for Him and other people; like evangelism of the lost and the care for the aged and poor.

Church, we need to do a heart-check. We are so prone to stray from devotion to Jesus and love for God and toward devotion to rules and love for knowledge. So many people dutifully attend every bible study the church offers. They are filled with head knowledge, but they don't love the Lord enough to spend regular personal time with Him.

There's no power over sin in their lives because they're disconnected from Jesus. They tell the same sad stories year after year. There's no passion in their lives because they've embraced a cold, empty version of Christianity over against a dynamic and on fire relationship with Jesus.

Hear the words of God to the prophet Ezekiel who wrote 2500 years ago:

“As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to his brother, ‘Come, and hear what the word is that comes from the LORD.’ And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain. And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it.”
Ezekiel 33:31-32

Even then, God showed Ezekiel the hypocrisy of religious people who talk like they love the Word but they have no intention of obeying it. They are committed to the ritual of religion, but their hearts are hard to the Lord. These people would judge others who they deem less theologically pure, less theologically educated.

Preparing for this sermon reminded me of Ezekiel’s vision in the Valley of Dry Bones. In Ezekiel 36, God promised that He would restore His people from their captivity and revitalize them by giving them a new heart and a new spirit. Indeed, He would replace their heart of stone with a heart of flesh and put His Spirit within them. (cf. 36:26-27). This must have caused Ezekiel to wonder, “is this even possible?”

VALLEY OF DRY BONES

In Ezekiel 37 we read of Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones. There Ezekiel explains how he was carried to a valley in the spirit. In the valley, he saw lots of bones and the bones were very dry. There was no sign of life! Then the Lord asks, “Can these bones live?” To which Ezekiel responds, “You know Lord.” Then the Lord commands Ezekiel to declare to the bones, “Live.” And the bones begin to assemble, and ligaments and muscle and flesh come together and out of the dry bones arises an army! What an incredible sight.

This was a vision of the spiritual future of Israel, a vision of an era in which we currently live. God promised there would be a time in Israel’s future in which God places His own Spirit in the hearts of His people. We know this is currently being fulfilled because before His ascension Jesus told His disciples that it is of greater advantage for Him to go away so that He could send the Spirit to us. Paul tells us in Romans 8 that anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ in them is not in Christ.

The vision of the valley of dry bones is being fulfilled the world over right now. The stony, cold hearts of sinful people are being replaced with hearts of flesh and the Lord is putting His Spirit within them. God was never interested in people just going through the motions. He was never interested in religious ritual detached from devotion to Him. Instead, God is calling people who will walk with Him in devotion; people made alive by the Spirit of God and indwelt by Him.

Wildwood, come alive!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bruce, F. F. (2008). *Romans: An introduction and commentary*. Inter-Varsity Press.
- Doriani, D. M. (2021). *Romans*. P&R Publishing.
- Hughes, Kent R. (1991). *Romans – Righteousness from Heaven*. Crossway.
- Kruse, Colin G. (2012). *Paul's Letter to the Romans*. W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Longenecker, Richard N. (2016). *The Epistle to the Romans*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- MacArthur, John. (1991). *Romans 1-8*. Moody Publishers.
- MacArthur, John. (1991). *Romans 9-16*. Moody Publishers.
- Moo, Douglas J. (2018). *The Letter to the Romans, Second Edition*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Mounce, Robert. (1995). *Romans*. B&H Publishing.
- Schreiner, Thomas R. (2018). *Romans, Second Edition*. Baker Publishing Group.
- Sproul, R. C. (2019). *The Righteous Shall Live By Faith – Romans*. Ligonier Ministries