

The Book of Romans
False Claims and Empty Rituals (Part 1)

Romans 2:25-29

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Well, I invite you to turn, this morning, with me to Romans 2, as we continue our journey through Paul's great letter to the churches that were in Rome in the first century. We come, this morning, to a section of Romans that, on the surface and at face value, frankly, looks like it is completely disengaged from our lives. It looks like it has nothing to speak into our existence because of the theme of the paragraph. But, as is always true with God's revealed Word, the truth that lies beneath the words of the apostle are every bit as much profound and as appropriate today as they were in the first century. I think you will see by the time we're done, this week and next, that nothing could be more applicable to the world in which we live than this section of Scripture.

Now, let me just remind you of where we've been. In the first three chapters of The Book of Romans Paul divides all of lost humanity, past, present, and future, into two great groups. The first group he addresses in chapter 1 verses 18 to 32. This group is described as those who know certain things about God their Creator, but who suppress that knowledge because of their love of their own sin. Maybe it's pride, maybe it's greed, maybe it's selfishness, or maybe some other motivator, but unrighteousness. Notice verse 18 of chapter 1, "For the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress," the Greek word means to hold down, "the truth." In other words, they suppress the truth that they know because of their own sin, "in unrighteousness."

What is the truth they know? Verse 19, "because that which is known about God the Creator is evident within them; for God made it evident to them." There is not one person who has ever lived who doesn't understand that there is a God who made this planet and this universe. Verse 20,

God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that all men are without excuse. For even though they knew God, [*that is, they knew about the reality of God*] they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, instead [*here's how man responds*] he becomes futile in his speculations, and his foolish heart is darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools.

They exchanged God's truth and the reality of God for error. They exchanged the truth of the true God for, he goes on to say in verse 23, for idols, "they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man" and so forth. And so those who will not worship the true God revealed in creation and the substance of whose Law is written on their hearts, they ultimately end up worshiping either themselves or something else, some false god. In biblical terms they are pagans.

Now, most of the people on this planet today fall into this first category that Paul addresses. It includes all of the great world religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 8, "There is no such thing as an idol in the world. There is no God but one." "The Father, from whom are all things and we *exist* for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we *exist* through Him."

The second group that Paul addresses, of lost humanity, consists of those who have attached themselves to the one true God. They're not pagan in the sense that they ignore God the Creator. Instead, this second group of lost humanity attaches themselves to the true God. They attach themselves to God and yet they will still face His wrath against their sin. They're very religious. They're very engaged. They acknowledge the one true God, the Creator of heaven and earth, but they will still face God's wrath against their sin.

Now today, this group includes many who claim to be Christians, but who are merely religious, whose hearts have never been truly changed. But in the first century this second group consisted almost exclusively of Jews and so Paul addresses the Jews. Beginning in chapter 2 verse 1 running through chapter 3 verse 8, Paul indicts this second group, the Jews and all who claim a connection to the true God, but who are, in fact, lost in religion and in self-righteousness.

Now, the heart of his indictment of this group comes in chapter 2 verse 3. Notice what he says, "But do you suppose this," is this how you think, and notice the end of verse 3, "that you will escape the judgment of God?" This is the heart of his indictment. The Jews had concluded that they would escape God's coming judgment and His wrath based on their circumstances. As the chapter unfolds we discover that they came to this mistaken conclusion because they put their confidence, their confidence of heaven, their assurance of eternal life, their confidence of avoiding God's future judgment against their sin, they put their confidence in several places, wrongly.

First of all, verse 17 says, they put their confidence in their nationality or their ethnicity, "you bear the name 'Jew.'" They were confident that because they belonged to the Jewish nation they were safe. Unfortunately, there are still people today who believe that it will be okay for them at the judgment because of their nationality. Believe it or not, it still happens. There are people who are born in America and because we're not primarily a Muslim nation, we're primarily a Christian nation, they think of it as a Christian nation, although less and less, and therefore think that they're going to be okay because of their nationality.

The Jews also put their confidence, their misplaced confidence, in their morality. This is the message of verses 1 to 16 of chapter 2, their morality. They thought because they were basically moral people, different than the pagans in chapter 1, that it was going to be okay.

Thirdly, they put their confidence of heaven, their confidence of being right with God, in a knowledge of spiritual things. We see this in verses 17 to 24 and we've looked at this together. Chapter 2 verses 17 to 24, they had the Law of God, they had the revelation of God, they had the Scripture, and they thought that meant that God was pleased with them and that they would not face judgment.

And then, as we'll see today, beginning in chapter 2 verse 25 and running down through verse 29, they were confident, assured of eternal life, because of their religious ritual, in their case circumcision, and their empty claims to belong to the true God. In other words, and this is what I want you to see, the basic problem with the Jewish position in chapter 2 of Romans is that their confidence was in external religion. And Paul wants them to know that religion, listen carefully, religion, even religion attached to the true God, will never save anyone on the day of judgment. Because our real problem is not the external, the real problem is our hearts. It's who we are. That's the problem.

And so Paul argues here in Romans 2 that even if we think we have some special claim on God because of our nationality, it's not going to save us. Although we may be outwardly moral and people may think of us as a basically good person, we still sin in exactly the same way pagans do and that sin demands a just God's punishment. Although we have and know spiritual truth revealed to us in the Scripture, we don't live up to and obey what we understand, and even though we go through outward forms and rituals of religion, our hearts may remain completely unchanged.

You see, here is the heart of Paul's argument in chapter 2, external religion is never enough. It will not rescue you from God's future judgment against your sins. In fact, he says several times in chapter 2, we'll see it in the next section we come to, that if you want to earn your way to heaven then here's the standard, you must perfectly obey God's Law - which is absolutely impossible. And you know it's impossible. Think of how many times the warning light on the dashboard of your soul has gone off and said, you just did something that you knew was wrong. That means we are, as Paul puts it in verse 25 of Romans 2, "transgressors of God's Law." We are rebels against our Creator and we are deserving of His just anger and punishment.

The only way, listen to me, the only way to be right with God your Creator is to abandon everything you have placed your hope in and put your hope completely in His way, which is the gospel of His Son, the good news that His Son brought to this planet. That's the message of the Scripture. You understand the gospel, the good news, it's the reality that God is the Creator. There is one true and living God who made all things, heaven and earth. He is the God who sustains all life. He is the reason your heart is beating this very moment. He is the reason that

you have food to eat, that you are able to assimilate the air and oxygen that you breathe. He sustains your life and as your Creator He has every right to tell you what to do.

And He has told you what to do, in this book and even in the substance of His Law written in your heart. You understand that there are things you ought to do, but you and I both are born rebels against God. We're born as sinners against Him and we grow up indulging in that sin and making choices that are contrary to His will and purpose and that sin deserves God's just punishment. You see, God declares Himself to be a God of absolute justice and we wouldn't want a God who was anything less than that. He says, "I will not acquit the wicked." That's what He says. "I will not acquit the guilty."

But the same God who is just and righteous and holy is also a God of love and grace. And He came up with a wise plan, the only way that He could rescue us from our sins, and that was, He sent His own eternal Son, the One who existed, as we read in John 1, as equal with Him, who was God, fully and completely God. He became man. He took on flesh. He became everything that you are except for sin. And He lived here on this planet for 33 years and He lived in perfect obedience to God the Creator. He obeyed Him in every way God required and then He died. He died for the sins, to satisfy the justice of God against the sins, of everyone who would ever believe in Him. And then God raised Him from the dead to show that He had accepted His sacrifice. And now He has ascended to heaven. And one day He says He will return.

The only way that you can have a right standing before God, the only way you can know God your Creator, is to accept that good news. And how do you accept it? Jesus said, you have to repent of your sins, you have to be willing to turn from your rebellion, and you have to believe in Jesus Christ. You have to put all of your hope and confidence for heaven in Him and Him alone. That's the gospel. Our only hope is for God to rescue us and He rescues us by forgiving our sins through Jesus and changing our hearts.

So, in this chapter Paul sets out to prove that the Jews, along with all moral religious people, need the gospel that he preached and that I just briefly summarized. And tragically, that's true, in part, because people who are lost from the true God, who don't know the true God, put all of their hope in the wrong things. Paul has already addressed two of those false hopes here in Romans 2. We've looked at them already. Let me just remind you of them.

First of all, in verses 1 to 16, he's addressed the false hope of knowing what is sinful and condemning it in others. Listen, knowing what is sinful and seeing and condemning it in the lives of others will not allow you to escape God's wrath if you're doing exactly the same things, and that's Paul's point. Morality, in other words, is a false hope, because however moral you may be, it falls short of God's ultimate standard, which is perfect obedience.

A second false hope the Jews had was having and knowing the Scripture. Listen, having and knowing the Scripture is not going to allow you to escape God's wrath either. This is the

message of verses 17 to 24. Knowing God's will is not enough. That's a false hope, because God who gave us His will expects us to obey it.

Now, this morning we come to a third reason that the Jews and all moral religious, but unconverted, people need the gospel, and it's this, claiming faith in God and performing religious rituals will not allow you to escape God's wrath. This is verses 25 to 29. Claiming faith in God, professing a faith in God, and performing various religious rituals, even those demanded by God, will not allow you to escape God's wrath, because often such claims are false claims and often religious rituals are an empty show, completely lacking in a holy heart that loves God. That's the message of the paragraph we come to this morning. Let's read it together. You follow along, Romans 2:25,

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. So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? 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? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

Now Paul's point in this paragraph is this, the fact that you make a verbal profession of faith in the true God, which is essentially what the rite of circumcision was, and the fact that you perform certain rituals, does not mean that you therefore truly belong to God and will escape His wrath at the coming judgment.

You see, Paul is still dealing here, as he has throughout chapter 2, with the Jews' misunderstanding of their relationship to God. They falsely clung to hopes that they thought would protect them from the coming judgment. Paul has already devastated their other, sort of, props. He's already addressed their morality and showed them, listen, basic morality isn't going to help you because it doesn't rise to God's standard. He's already shown them that having the Law of God and understanding the Law of God isn't enough, you have to do the Law of God, and now in these verses he destroys the Jews' one remaining argument.

Think about how one of his opponents might have responded. He might have said, okay, I've got to give you where you've been so far Paul. I understand what you're saying. Okay, even though my morality can't save me and even though I can't have confidence in simply having and understanding the Scriptures, because it's true I don't do them perfectly, I still have something. I still have a unique relationship to God as a descendant of Abraham and I have the sign of that unique relationship, my circumcision. God can't judge me, a circumcised son Abraham. You see, they clung to an external ritual that pictured their profession of faith in the true God and they

thought, because of that, they were exempt from the coming wrath. But it was absolutely foolish for them to put their confidence in a profession of faith they made and in a ritual that they performed.

Now, the Jewish rite of circumcision is as foreign to most 21st century Christians as a ham sandwich at a bar mitzvah. It just is completely strange to us. All right, can we admit that? When I read that text and you were hearing the words uncircumcision and circumcision, it's like a different planet. And so for us to really understand what Paul is saying here, we need to go back into his cultural timeframe and understand. We need to step back and I need to give you a brief explanation of the Jewish rite of circumcision. It's only with that foundation that you're going to be able to understand what Paul is really saying in this paragraph. And so, Lord willing, that's what we're going to do today and, Lord willing, next week we'll walk through the verses themselves and exegete them together.

So, circumcision, what is it? Well, the word circumcision means "a cutting around," the Hebrew word. As you probably know, circumcision is a simple operation that removes the male foreskin. We can't be certain when the practice began, but it was common already in the time of Abraham. Many of the ancient Semitic peoples, including the Egyptians, the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Edomites, all practiced it. Even Ishmael and his descendants, the Arab peoples of the world, initially, according to Genesis 17, practiced it as well. Outside of Israel, as in Egypt for example, circumcision was usually performed at one of two points in a man's life, either at puberty, when he came of age, became a man, or when he was preparing for marriage.

What made it unique in Israel was two things, even though it was practiced all around them, it was unique in Israel for two reasons. One, because of when it was done. Israel was the only place in the ancient world where it was done on the eighth day of a male child's life. And, more importantly, it was unique because of the spiritual meaning that God gave it, and we'll look at that in a moment.

Now, the first biblical command of circumcision was to Abraham back in Genesis 17. I'd like for you to turn there with me, Genesis 17. Just to remind you of the time frame of Abraham's life, he lived in about 2166, in that time frame, in the 2100's B.C. Chapter 12 of Genesis, he is called out of Ur of the Chaldees, out of the Babylon area, he was called out of his idolatry to worship the one living and true God. In chapter 15 we're told that his faith was reckoned unto him as righteousness, he's declared to have a right standing before God by virtue of his faith.

Fast-forward from that event more than 16 years and we come to Genesis 17:1,

Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him,

"I am God Almighty;
Walk before Me, and be blameless.

And I will establish My covenant between Me and you,
And I will multiply you exceedingly.”

God then gives him some of the stipulations of the covenant, reminding him of what He’s going to do, verse 5, “I will make you the father of a multitude of nations.” By the way, that probably has a physical aspect. Remember, Abraham birthed Ishmael, and Ishmael is the father of the Arab nations, and, of course, Isaac is the father of the Jewish nation. So there’s a physical sense in which that’s true, but I think beyond that, all the way back in Genesis 12, God promised that through Abraham, through his seed, all the descendants of the peoples of the Earth would be blessed, meaning spiritually blessed, talking about Christ, Paul tells us in Galatians 3, the great descendant of Abraham. And so I think there’s a spiritual implication of this is well; he’s not only the father of physical nations, he’s the father of a great spiritual nation made up of peoples from every tribe and tongue and nation who’ve come to believe in His great Son, the Messiah.

Now, notice how He goes on to say, verse 7, “I’m going to make an everlasting covenant to be God to you and to your descendants after you.” But I want there to be a sign of this covenant, verse 9,

God said further to Abraham, “Now as for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. And you shall be circumcised, Abram, in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be a sign, [*now here’s the key*] it shall be [*notice*] the sign of the covenant between Me and you. And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations.

And He goes on to say, it doesn’t matter if it’s one of your natural born descendants or if it’s a foreigner in your household, all males who are a part of the nation are to be circumcised.

Verse 14, “But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.” God says, listen, I don’t want anybody who refuses to take this sign of the covenant to enjoy the temporal blessings of being a part of My nation. And so, this is very important to God. So as a result of this command, Abraham was circumcised at the age of 99 and God commanded it of all the Jewish males as the sign of their belonging to the covenant that God had made with Abraham and his descendants.

Now, that’s around 2100. Let’s fast forward 600 to 700 years to the time of Moses. God explicitly commanded the descendants of Abraham, in the Mosaic Law, to keep this as well. Leviticus 12:3, “On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.” This was required of all Jewish males. And just to show you how seriously God took this, read Exodus 4.

In Exodus 4 Moses's son has not been circumcised and God shows up and threatens to take Moses's life if his son isn't circumcised. And what Moses should have done, but didn't do, his wife Zipporah does and isn't happy about it.

But God says you must, this is the sign of the covenant. Why? Why is this so important? In Exodus 12:48 we're told that a man couldn't partake of the Passover without circumcision. What is the point of all of this? When you come to the New Testament, our Lord, fulfilling the commands of the Old Testament, we're told in Luke, was circumcised on the eighth day according to the Law. What is this about? We have to ask the question of why? Why did God institute circumcision? What was the purpose of this bizarre practice?

Well, circumcision served two basic purposes, physical purposes and a spiritual purpose. First of all, the physical purposes. There are two of them. Circumcision on the eighth day physically marked or distinguished the descendants of Abraham. Although there were others who were circumcised in the ancient world, only the Jews were circumcised as males on the eighth day of their existence. It marked them out as distinct, as the ethnic descendants of Abraham.

There's another potential physical purpose, may have been, it may have served a hygienic purpose. According to the Roman historian Herodotus, one of the primary reasons the Egyptians circumcised was sanitary, and some have argued that Jewish women have traditionally had a lower rate of cervical cancer. That's neither here nor there. But this we can be sure of, God intended circumcision primarily to serve a spiritual purpose. And here's the spiritual purpose. It was a picture of the need for spiritual cleansing and renewal.

We learn this from several Old Testament texts. I want to turn with me to Deuteronomy 10. Here we get some insight into what this bizarre ritual was actually picturing. Deuteronomy 10:12, "Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you?" As Moses speaks to the children of Israel on the plains of Moab before they go into the Promised Land, he asks the question, "What does God demand of you?" And then he lists five requirements and the center one is to love Him. Remember, it was the great commandment. The *shema*, back in Deuteronomy 6, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind." This is the great commandment. That's the center command. And then there are four others.

He says, you should "fear the LORD your God." You should "walk in all His ways." That is, your whole life should be ordered and structured to walk in His Will. You should "serve the LORD your God with all your heart with all your soul." That word serve has the idea of worship. It's used in context of worship. It's what we're doing this morning. You should commit yourself to worshipping God the Creator with your whole heart, with your soul. And you should "keep His commandments and His statutes." You should do what He tells you to do. And I love this, notice how verse 13 ends, and this is "for your good." It's for your good.

He goes on to say, verse 15, or verse 14 rather,

Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the highest heavens, the earth and all that is in it. Yet on your fathers [*Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*] did the LORD set His affection to love them, and He chose their descendants after them, even you above all the peoples, as it is this day.

By the way, that didn't mean God didn't love the other people on the planet. If I had time I would show you that God chose Israel to be His witness nation, to make His name known, to make Him known throughout the world.

Now, in response to what God has done, notice what He says in verse 16, "So," in light of this, "circumcise your," what? "Your heart." "Circumcise your heart and stiffen your neck no longer." Here we learn that circumcision was a picture of something that needed to happen in the heart, of a radical change that needed to be worked in the heart. We are, by nature, rebels and stubborn against God our Creator. We want our own way. We want to be thought erudite and intelligent. We want to pursue our own sin. There are a lot of reasons we leave God and stray from Him, but we're to circumcise our hearts, to cleanse our hearts.

There's a spiritual significance to circumcision. Jeremiah the prophet touches on this in Jeremiah 4:4, he says, "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD and remove the foreskins of your heart, 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." God says, listen, unless there's a radical change to your heart, you're going to face My just anger against your sins. In Jeremiah 9 Jeremiah tells his fellow Israelites, listen, you may be physically circumcised, but so are the other nations around you, and you're no better than them because they may be physically circumcised but they have uncircumcised hearts and so do you.

So understand then that circumcision was supposed to be an outward sign of an inward change in the heart. But here's the problem and it's a huge problem. We can't effect that change of our hearts. We are commanded to circumcise our hearts but we can't, we can't cleanse our own hearts. We can't effect the radical change required. It's a change that only God Himself can do.

If you're still in Deuteronomy turn over to Deuteronomy 30. Here Moses describes the judgments that God will bring on His people for their sin, including exile, and when they find themselves exiled, he calls them to repent, but then God promises that He will act. Notice Deuteronomy 30:6, "Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants." I will act, God says, I'm going to produce a radical change to your heart. And here's what it's going to effect, notice what He says, "to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live." God says, listen, I'm going to produce a radical change in your heart and it will produce genuine love for Me and it will produce true spiritual life. You will really live, but only if I do it.

So circumcision then symbolized a heart that God Himself had changed and cleansed, a holy heart, a heart that now desires to love God and serve God and obey the True and Living God. Now, turn back to our text in Romans 2 and let me show you how it ties in. Romans 2:28, “circumcision is not that which is outward in the flesh.” That’s not what circumcision is really about. Instead, verse 29, “circumcision is that which is of the heart, produced by the work of the Spirit.”

You can’t change your heart, you can’t change the person you are, you can’t deal with the sinfulness of your own soul. God has to do it and He does it through His Spirit. He radically alters the heart. He changes us. In other words, circumcision was ultimately supposed to be a sign that, like Abraham, you had placed your faith in the one living and true God and He had changed your heart. He had given you, in the words of the prophet Ezekiel, “a heart of flesh in place of your heart of stone.” It was a sign that you had received the gift of a right standing before God because of your faith in Him.

Turn over to Romans 4. Paul is dealing here with how a man is made just before God. How can you be declared right with God? And it’s through faith in the work of Jesus Christ is his answer, as we’ll see as it unfolds. Abraham experienced this, he said. So, when was Abraham credited to be righteous? When was his faith credited as righteousness, verse 10, was it “while he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised.”

You know what Paul’s doing? He is arguing the chronology of Genesis. He’s saying, think about what happens in Genesis. In chapter 15 Abraham is declared to be right with God through faith alone in the grace of God. In chapter 17, more than 16 years later in his life, he’s given the sign of circumcision. Verse 11, “he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe,” both Jews who are physically circumcised and Gentiles who are not physically circumcised, but all of whom have the faith of Abraham.

Now, there’s one other question that’s important and that is, why did the sign or the seal of the Abrahamic Covenant involve the male reproductive organ? It’s because it contains the seed that is only capable of producing other depraved sinners. It’s a picture, a profound picture, of human depravity. When man sets about to produce offspring he can’t produce good offspring, all he can produce is more sinners like himself. If you’re a parent, you have children who sin just like you do. So it’s a powerful illustration of our depravity. We can’t produce anything but sin in our own lives and when we produce other lives we produce sinners.

So circumcision became a picture of man’s need for radical cleansing in his heart, not external, but in his inner being, a cleansing that’s necessary to reverse the effects of our depravity. A cleansing that only God Himself could accomplish. So it was at the same time a profound picture of the depths of human depravity and of divine cleansing. Circumcision wasn’t about what was on the outside, it was merely a picture about what needed to happen to the heart.

But here was the problem with the first century Jewish understanding of circumcision. They substituted the external act for the internal reality of a changed heart. In other words, they placed their confidence of eternal life in the sign. If you had the sign, you were in. If you were circumcised, you were guaranteed heaven. As one writer put it, Barrett describes it, the typical first century Jew relied upon circumcision as “a certain passport to Heaven.”

There’s clear evidence, by the way, in the writings of the rabbis, that this is exactly what they believed. Let me give you a couple of examples. The Jewish Mishnah says that all Israelites have a share in the world to come. Rabbi Levi writes, “In the Hereafter Abraham will sit at the entrance to Gehenna, or hell, and permit no circumcised Israelite to descend therein.” Rabbi Menachem says, “Our Rabbis have said that no circumcised man will see Hell.” Another Jewish source, “Circumcision saves from Hell.” The Midrash Tillim, “God swore to Abraham that no one who was circumcised should be sent to Hell.” In fact, the rabbis taught that only under the most extreme circumstances could circumcision fail to save a man from Hell. That was the mindset of the Jews to whom Paul brought the gospel in the first century. And you can understand why this was such an issue.

Now, after the church began at Pentecost in Acts 2, all of those who were saved, all of those new believers, were either Jews or Jewish proselytes. In other words, all of the males who believed were already, what? Circumcised. So there was no issue. But as time went on, Gentiles, uncircumcised Gentiles, began to believe. In Acts 8, under the ministry of Philip, in Acts 10, Peter with Cornelius, in Acts 13, as Paul began his missionary journeys, Gentiles are saved and this raised a huge question.

And there was a group of those out of the Pharisaic party who had come to say they believe in Jesus as the Messiah, who began to teach, you have to first become Jewish before you can be saved. You had to be circumcised and you had to keep the Jewish Law. This group was called the Judaizers and their teachings infiltrated the church in a hurry. In fact, in most of the letters of the New Testament in that first century era you find their influence and the writers of the New Testament addressing their influence. It was so much an issue that it was the issue at the first church council, the Jerusalem Council, in about the year 49 A.D. And the theological question about circumcision was forever settled at that council.

Turn to Acts 15. Acts 15:1, “Some men came down from Judea and *began* teaching the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’” That’s what they taught. You first have to become Jewish. You’ve got to be circumcised. If you want to be saved by Christ, you first have to be circumcised. And a great dissension and debate erupts on this issue, verse 2. Verse 5, we learn a little more about what they taught, “some of the sect of the Pharisees,” that’s where they came from, they were those who embrace Jesus as Messiah, but they were out of the Pharisees, they ostensibly believed, “stood up, saying, ‘It is necessary to

circumcise them,” but that’s not enough, “and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.” They’ve got to be circumcised and keep Moses’s Law.

So, “the apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.” Verse 7, “After there had been much debate, Peter stood up,” and Peter speaking for the apostles puts this issue forever to rest. Look at verse 10, “Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the gentile disciples a yoke which neither our fathers,” our Jewish forefathers, “nor we have been able to bear?” We haven’t kept God’s Law, he says, why would you insist that these Gentile converts do it? And then he gives the definitive statement of how a man is made right with God. Verse 11, “But we believe,” this is what we teach, “that we are spiritually rescued through the grace of the Lord Jesus in the same way that they also are.” There doesn’t need to be circumcision. There doesn’t need to be keeping the Law. In fact, when Paul teaches the churches in Galatia, turn over to Galatians 5, he comes back to this, verse 2,

Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, [*he doesn’t mean if you’re circumcised, he means if you’re receiving circumcision for salvation*]
Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that’s not enough, you’ve got to go ahead and keep the whole Law then.

You want to earn your way to heaven? You can’t stop with circumcision, you have got to obey everything. And in fact, verse 4, if you take that approach, “You’ve been severed from Christ.” Why? “Because you are seeking to be made right with God by your keeping of the Law; you have fallen from grace.” It doesn’t mean those who were genuinely believers became non-believers. It means those who appeared to be believers were not, in fact, the real deal because they had embraced a false gospel. That’s what Paul calls this back in chapter 1, he calls it a false gospel.

Look at chapter 6 verse 15, “For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision.” Listen, the physical state of a man doesn’t matter. Here’s what really matters, verse 15, “a new creation.” Has God radically changed your heart? That’s the issue, what circumcision was supposed to represent. You see, Paul’s point here is that if someone requires circumcision or, listen carefully, any other ritual for salvation, that person is teaching a false gospel. Think Christian baptism. Whatever ritual may be required in order to be saved is a false gospel.

Now, with that background, you can understand why an important part of Paul’s gospel presentation in the first century was to show the Jews that circumcision would not help them at the judgment. And that’s exactly what he does in Romans 2:25-29. He explains why it is such a terrible mistake to trust in some ritual to make you right with God in this life. And, by all means, don’t show up at the judgment claiming some ritual. External rituals cannot protect from God’s just wrath on the day of judgment. Why? Because as Romans 2 makes it clear, God looks at the

heart. He doesn't look at things the way you want people to see them. He looks at who you really are. He looks at your heart.

Think of the rituals that are part of the Christian faith. Baptism. The Lord's Supper. Bible reading, we could say, regular Bible reading is commanded. Regular prayer. Attending church, "don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together," the writer of Hebrews says, "as is the manner of some." Those are all things we're required to do. But if you take those things and you say that's part of what gives me a right standing before God, that's part of what assures me of heaven, then you're believing a false gospel. You need to abandon everything in which you place your hope except Jesus Christ and His perfect life lived in your place and His death died to satisfy God's justice against your sins. That's the only place your hope can be.

You see, ultimately circumcision reminds us that we all need God to perform a radical cleansing of our hearts. Jesus described this in one of the most beautiful ways. He described it as a "new birth." Turn with me to John 3. I want you to see this because here is a picture of what we're studying in Romans 2. Here is a man who is like the living portrait of what Paul is dealing with in Romans 2. His name is Nicodemus. It's during the ministry of Jesus. Verse 1 says, "Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews."

Here was a man who was very religious. He was at the top of Judaism. In fact, verse 10 says he was "the teacher in Israel." There wasn't a single teacher in Israel who had risen above him. He was the most influential, the most highly respected teacher in Judaism in the first century. He was also, verse 1 says, "a ruler of the Jews." That means he was one of 71 men on Israel's ruling council. Here was a powerful religious man. Don't forget the kind of religious man he was. He had memorized most of the Old Testament. He tithed his herbs. He fasted twice a week. He prayed constantly. He was known for his discipline of his body. He was a very, very religious man.

But, as is true with many religious people who haven't had God change their hearts, there is an emptiness, there is something they recognize, there is something they know. And this man, for all of his accolades, he knew he was missing something. He still wondered if, in fact, he was really going to make it at the judgment, if he was going to enter the kingdom of salvation, the kingdom of those who had been rescued by God. And so he comes, verse 2, "this man came to Jesus by night." Probably because of his peers. He was a member of the ruling party. He didn't want to be recognized, probably, with Jesus and incur their wrath, but he was desperate to talk to Jesus. "He said to him, 'Rabbi we know that You have come from God as a teacher.'"

Now this is really important. John wrote his gospel for two reasons. He wrote it, he tells us, for a polemic purpose, that is, to argue that Jesus is, in fact, the Messiah promised in the Old Testament, the Son of God. And secondly, he wrote it for an evangelistic purpose, so that knowing that, we might believe. Every passage you come to in the Gospel of John deals with

those two issues, proving that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and calling us to believe in Him.

Here we have a polemic statement, because here is one of the leaders of Israel, one of the 71, who doesn't believe in Him, still affirming who Jesus is. "We know that You have come from God as a teacher." He also affirms His true miracles, "for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." "Jesus answered and said to him." Now, you know, we don't have the whole, probably the whole dialogue back and forth between them, it probably covered much more time and this is a, sort of, condensed version, but I suspect that in the real dialogue, as here, Nicodemus never got to his question. Did you notice that? Nicodemus says, "we know You're a teacher sent from God. We know Your signs, you know, by Your signs." And Jesus answered him. Did I miss something? Where's the question?

You see, Jesus knew the question because, look back in verse 25 of chapter 2, "He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man." Jesus knew what Nicodemus was thinking and why he came. And so He answers the question Nicodemus hasn't yet had time to ask and that is, how can I be sure that I'm going to belong to the kingdom of God? And Jesus says, "Truly, truly," that's what He says when He wants to correct someone's thinking, "I say to you, unless one is born," now notice, in our New American Standard, the word "again," there's a marginal note, look at the marginal note, "from above." The Greek word is *anōthen*. That is exactly what it means. "Unless one is born from above," unless God births you, that's what He's saying, "he cannot see the kingdom of God." God has to do something.

You know what He's saying to Nicodemus? He's saying, listen, you came hoping I would tell you something else you need to do to make sure you get into heaven, or to tell you something you should stop doing in order to get into heaven. But I'm telling you, you've got to abandon everything you've accomplished so far, you've got to start over.

Nicodemus gets it. Verse 4, how? How can this happen? Now, Nicodemus isn't stupid; he's a brilliant guy. I don't think he's here thinking Jesus is talking, he needs to physically be reborn. I think he's playing along with what Jesus is saying and he's saying, okay, so I need a fresh start, I need to be born all over again, but how does that happen? I mean, I'm an old man, I can't go back into my mom's womb and be born. So how can that happen?

Jesus tells him how in verse 5, "Truly, truly, I say to you," and here He corrects it, it's something God has to do, "unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Now, Nicodemus was a teacher of the Old Testament, he was "the teacher in Israel." He had memorized much of the Old Testament. He knew this was a reference to Ezekiel's prophecy where the new covenant is promised, where God says,

“I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you will be clean from your sin. And I will put My Spirit within you. I’ll give you a heart of flesh. I’ll write My laws on your heart so that you can do them.”

In other words, Nicodemus, the Spirit has to do this. Verse 6, “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” The Spirit has to do this, so “Don’t be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’” This is something God has to do.

And then He says, oh and by the way, the Spirit sovereignly decides when and on whom He will do this. Verse 8, the Spirit is like the wind. “‘The wind blows where it wishes,’” it blows where it wishes, “‘and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from and where it’s going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.’” You can’t control the wind and you can’t control the Spirit. You need what only the Spirit can do and the Spirit sovereignly decides to do what He does.

Now, if you’re Nicodemus at this point, what’s your question? Well, okay, but how? What do I do? And that’s exactly what he says, verse 9, “Nicodemus said to Him,” how, how can this happen? “‘How can these things be?’” Jesus doesn’t answer him here, but John has already answered that question. Go back to chapter 1. We read it this morning in the Scripture reading. “But as many as received Jesus, to them He gave the right,” or authority, “to become children of God.” Then he explains what received means, “even to those who believe in His name,” who put all of their hope in all that Jesus is, in who He is and what He did.

And if you do that, notice verse 13, literally the Greek text says, “having been born,” “having been born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man.” In other words, you experience a birth that wasn’t something you decided, it was something God decided, that’s the divine side of salvation. The human side is verse 12, “receive Him,” that is, “believe in His name.” That’s how this happens.

Do you understand that your only hope, my only hope, is a heart change? Our hearts need to be circumcised. Our hearts need to be radically altered and changed, and only God can do that, and only the Spirit of God does it. And the only thing I can do is cry out for God to do it and put my confidence in the Son He sent. Lord willing, next time we’ll look through the text of Romans 2 itself. Let’s pray together.

Father, thank You for Your words. Seal it to our hearts. Father, for those of us who have already experienced that radical change of heart that only You can perform, Father, give us grateful hearts. May we praise You and love You and serve You.

And Father, I pray for those here this morning who are spiritually blinded, who are rebels against You their Creator. May this be the day when they end their rebellion and by a work of Your

sovereign grace, they come to know You. May they believe in Christ as their only hope of heaven. May they abandon everything else for Him. We pray in Jesus's name, amen.