

Tuesday Evening Bible Study at Tokyo Baptist Church
Paul's Letter to the Romans – Chapter 2, Verses 25 - 29
Notes from Tuesday August 17, 2010
Last Revised on August 18, 2010

Songs

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We confess that we are people of unclean lips

and uncircumcised hearts, unworthy to come before you.

We admit that there is nothing we can do to make ourselves righteous.

We repent in the dust and the ashes and turn to you O Lord,

Asking you to forgive our sins through your great mercy.

We ask that the the blood of Christ, shed on the cross for us, would cover us now and always.

Please wash us clean and renew our hearts and cause your Spirit to dwell in us more fully.

Please help us to Love you, Lord, and to love one another and all men more perfectly.

Please prepare our hearts and minds for this evening's study.

And please guide and protect our study and everything that happens here.

Please glorify yourself in our midst.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen

Introduction

In this class, for those of you who are new, we are studying the Letter of Paul to the Romans.

Notes for all previous classes have been posted on the class web site, for your review.

Last week our reading took us up to Verse 24 of Chapter 2.

Before we read on, I will review just a little bit.

Review

The first 15 1/2 verses of Chapter 1 are introductory, but they tell us important things.

They tell us that we are reading a letter written by the Apostle Paul to Christians.

We also learn from the introductory verses, that the diverse group of Christian believers to whom this letter was written originally, was located in a city which Paul had never before visited.

In this way we stand in the same relationship to Paul as did the original readers of this letter.

As do we, the Christians which Paul addressed in Rome came from a wide variety of backgrounds, and in the remaining verses of Chapter 1, Paul makes it plain that all humans, without exception are corrupt, deserving only death, and therefore in need of salvation.

In view of what he has said in Chapter 1, Paul continues in the first 11 verses of Chapter 2, to make it plain that none of us are in a position to judge others. No group of people is in a favorable position insofar as their salvation is concerned!

Paul may or may not already have his fellow Jewish Christians in mind at the beginning of Chapter 2, but this does not lessen the applicability of this principle to us. Before God all men and women are the same!

God is our judge. He judges based on what we do, and not on who we are. "For God shows no partiality." (2:11)

Furthermore, Paul continues in verses 12-15, knowing what the Bible says, does not somehow put us in God's good graces. "For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified." (2:13) Even without knowing the law Gentiles know right from wrong and frequently exhibit this knowledge through their righteous behavior. Religious training, in other words, will not save you.

Even those, such as the Jews, who legitimately are in a position to teach the Bible to others may, for precisely that reason, bring dishonor to God through their disobedience. This is the gist of verses 17-24, which is where we ended last week's reading. Surely this principle applies to all who find themselves in a position of leadership within the Church.

But being Jewish was never just, or even mainly, about knowing what the Bible says and obeying it. Very few Jews ever believed or taught that their salvation would come from perfectly keeping the law. This is a caricature of Jewish thought which is largely invalid. Being Jewish was always more about being chosen by God, and set apart for God's special purposes.

And it was about the promises that God had made to the Jews, which promises were signified by the rite of circumcision, and all of the other religious rites and ceremonies which God Himself had instituted among them, to signify their unique relationship with Him.

So does Paul mean to say that all of these things count for nothing?!

This is a very big question --- one which we examined extensively in our recent study of Hebrews --- and one which Paul now begins to answer in what we will read tonight.

Are there any questions before we read on?

The Letter of Paul to the Romans, Chapter 2, Verses 25 -29

Can someone please read Verses 25-29 in Japanese.

Thank you. Now can someone please read those same verses in English?

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.

Thank you.

So verse 25 reads...

(Verse 25)

For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.

The word "for" which begins verse 25, looks back to the preceding thought, which was that Jews who break the law dishonor God all the more by boasting in the law.

This is a word spoken against hypocrisy and against the notion that someone can be saved

simply by calling himself a Jew. It is a word spoken against “nominal” Judaism.

Exactly the same principle is applied here to circumcision, which is the outward mark of being one of God’s chosen people.

Being one of God’s chosen people is indeed of value, Paul says, if you obey the law.

But, if you break the law, you become as if you were not circumcised, as if you were a Gentile.

What is emerging here in verse 25, is a definition of circumcision which is not equivalent to the outward sign.

Q. Is it possible to be circumcised in this other way, without actually, physically being circumcised?

Paul moves to this question next.

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Verse 26 reads,

(Verse 26)

So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?

This is a rhetorical question.

The grammar anticipates an affirmative answer, and so this is, in effect, a positive statement.

An uncircumcised gentile who keeps the precepts of the law may be, according to Paul, regarded as circumcised, in the figurative sense that Paul is exploring here.

Paul is not speaking nonsense, by the way. There is of course a plain and simple way of speaking of circumcision: does the man have his foreskin or not? Is the man officially Jewish or not.

But here Paul is developing a figure of speech (known as metonymy I think) in which the sign is substituted for the thing signified.

Circumcision was ordained by God as a sign of his covenant relationship with Abraham’s descendants.

Paul is now using the word “circumcision” to refer to the underlying relationship itself.

Paul is suggesting here that such a relationship with God may be seen in those who do not bear this external mark of circumcision, and that the absence of the external mark is no

deficit; such people are, in effect, for all practical purposes, children of the faithful Abraham, even though they have never actually been circumcised.

This is a consistent teaching of the whole Bible and the same argument that Paul has been developing all along and will continue to develop going forward: God is no respecter of persons.

He judges all men, not by what they **know**, or by **who** they are, but by what they **do**,

and not what they do merely as a matter of religious practice --- be it circumcision, baptism or the Lords Supper, studying or teaching the Bible, tithing or what have you --- but by the works which proceed in love from the heart of one in whom God's Spirit dwells.

The very presence in the world --- and in the church in Rome --- of spirit-filled, Gentiles seems to call into question the the value of being Jewish, particularly among those Jewish Christians who understand that, like all men, they themselves are lawbreakaers!

Verse 27 reads:

(Verse 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.

This does not mean that Gentile Christians are superior to Jewish Christians, only that the latter must now be reluctant to press their claims to moral superiority though boasting in the law and in circumcision, since it has become clear that there are in this world both Gentile believers and Jewish non-believers!

(Verse 28)

For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.

This means that Jewishness, real inward Jewishness, in the sense Paul now has in mind, is not a matter of external ceremony but of internal spiritual reality; it is and has always been a matter of faith! Faith like we recently read about in Hebrews 11!

And that what he says in Verse 29

(Verse 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.

The true Jew, then, is the one with a heart yielded to the Holy Spirit, and his approbation comes from God and not from man, from the Spirit and not from the letter of the Law.

Clearly no man of faith has ever supposed that he kept the letter of the Law perfectly, or could ever do so.

The whole Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, makes this so totally clear that nobody could possibly think otherwise; if anyone is saved, it is by the grace of God alone.

All the heroes of faith in the Old Testament knew this.

And now in the light of Christ, this has all become so much more clear to us: it is by grace we are saved through faith ... **for** but never **by** our works! God is no respecter of persons.

Which leads us naturally into the question which begins Chapter 3.

Any questions before we read on?