

When in Romans Do as the Righteous Do

2:17-29

Growing up I believed there was a God. I believed that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. I knew that He died and rose again on the third day; that He ascended into Heaven; and that one day He would judge the living and the dead to determine whether their destination would be Heaven or Hell.

I wasn't too worried because I was taught that I was born right. I was born into the right religion, which for me was Roman Catholicism. I had admirably performed the basic rites and rituals: Baptism, Confession, First Holy Communion, and Confirmation. By birth and by rites and rituals I would be going to Heaven - if not immediately, eventually.

What a satanic deception! I was on the broad path that leads to destruction. All these things were my own works of righteousness which would fall far short of getting me into Heaven.

If ever there were a people born right and into privilege, it was and is the Jews. If it were possible to be saved, to get into Heaven, based on birth and rites and rituals, then the Jew would have an advantage, for sure.

Paul will effectively argue that even the privileged Jew must be justified by God by believing in Jesus Christ.

Paul discusses Jewish confidence in their Hebrew birth in verses seventeen through twenty-four:

Romans 2:17 Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God,

These are things the Jews trusted in to get them to Heaven:

- “Called a Jew” means they were part of God’s chosen nation. God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees and had made a great nation through him.

- “Rest on the law” means they believed that their possession of the law gave them ultimate spiritual rest and salvation.
- “Make your boast in God” has to do with the fact that the one true God had made unconditional promises to the Jews.

Romans 2:18 and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law,

“Know His will” meant the Jew had special revelation from God. They had the Hebrew Bible. They could “approve the things that are excellent” because God had told them what things to do, to not do, to love, to hate.

Jews thus had a great advantage over the Gentiles. As we saw in chapters one and two, all that the Gentiles had was creation and conscience to guide them. Special revelation belonged to the Jews.

Romans 2:19 and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness,

Romans 2:20 an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law.

All their privileges gave the Jews a sense of superior knowledge. They knew the “truth” and had the “law.” They were at the top of the religious pile. Gentiles must convert to Judaism in order to enter in to these privileges.

None of these things, however, was sufficient to save even one Jew!

They, too, were lost and in need of the salvation that can only come through being justified by faith. They, too, needed to be declared righteous by God because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Don’t forget that the point of these opening chapters of Romans is to establish the universal problem that all have fallen short of the glory of God, including the Jews. There is no one, Jew or Gentile, who is righteous.

Even with all these advantages and privileges being a Jew *outwardly* brought no change *inwardly*.

Romans 2:21 You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal?

Romans 2:22 You who say, "Do not commit adultery," do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

The Jews taught others, supposedly about God's righteousness, but they remained unrighteous. Their teaching had no power to bring change and it was evidenced by the lack of change in themselves.

They still stole and committed adultery. They did so both *openly* and *secretly*.

- Openly the Jews stole by, for example, in their practice of what was called korban. "Korban" means *given to God*. A Jew would declare something "korban" and thus it prevented their needy parents from using it. However, they could still use it while they were alive! It was a form of stealing from your parents - a form of elder abuse.
- Openly the Jews committed adultery, for example, by allowing divorce and remarriage for causes other than physical adultery. The person who married someone who had been divorced without grounds was committing adultery.

They were also doing these things secretly.

- Secretly the Jews stole by coveting.
- Secretly the Jews committed adultery by looking upon a woman or a man with lust.

As for idolatry and the robbing of temples, while the Jews may not have idols in the traditional sense, they did allow idolatrous practices to go on in their Temple, e.g., the moneychangers and the selling of 'approved' sacrificial animals.

Or this may simply refer to having idols in their hearts and fantasizing about them, in effect "robbing the temples" of the world.

When He was on the earth Jesus strongly rebuked the Pharisees for urging others to do what they could not themselves do. They put religious burdens on men that they were not able to bear.

Here, Paul accuses the typical Jew - not necessarily the Pharisee, the scribe, or the Sadducee - of doing the same thing the Pharisees did. They taught and demanded one thing of others and did something else.

Romans 2:23 You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law?

Obviously if you were breaking the very law your were boasting of having and keeping it was dishonoring to God.

Romans 2:24 For "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you," as it is written.

This is a quote from the prophet Isaiah. It was intended to cause the first century Jewish reader to think back over the history of Israel. Far from being a light to the Gentile nations, Israel's history is one in which her sin caused the name of God to be blasphemed. Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, then were subject to the Medo-Persians, the Greeks and the Romans. They would shortly be scattered all over the globe and be without their promised land for about two thousand years. I'd say that qualifies for the name of God being blasphemed among the Gentiles!

Israel's greater privileges put her under greater responsibility, and she had failed.

Having said all this, I think we need to understand how difficult it might be for an ethnic Jew to think he was anything other than chosen and thus saved. He might, for example, point to circumcision as proof he'd been set apart from birth.

No other people circumcised their male children on the eighth day of life. God used it as a mark or a sign, authenticating that the person had made the Old Covenant with Him. It was done on the eighth day to indicate that Israelites were born into a covenant relationship with God. They had to do nothing except to be born.

True, but circumcision was always meant as a symbol. Circumcision was never intended to save anyone. Even in the Old Testament God told Israel that He was looking for an inward change, a change in the heart, a circumcision of the heart:

Deuteronomy 10:16 "Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.

The prophet Jeremiah told the circumcised Jews of the sixth century, "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem" (4:4).

No outward ordinance or ritual can save anyone. God is looking for a change of heart, not of flesh.

Romans 2:25 For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.

After a time the Jews became so proud of the outward ritual that they contemptuously called Gentiles "the uncircumcision."

This comment of Paul's is pretty strong language. He was essentially saying that a Jew was no better off than a Gentile. Worse, that a Jew was just like a Gentile! He backed it up with irrefutable logic.

Romans 2:26 Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision?

Romans 2:27 And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you who, even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law?

Paul was saying that the uncircumcised Gentile who followed his own conscience and in principle kept the righteous requirements of the law he didn't even know - that person had a circumcised heart.

The circumcised Jew who broke the law had an uncircumcised heart.

Circumcision is important - but it's the spiritual circumcision of the heart which is depicted by the cutting away of the flesh.

Physical circumcision is no longer necessary for spiritual purposes. It was a forerunner or type of what God really wanted - circumcision of the heart. This is why the assembled apostles and elders of the New Testament church declared circumcision to be one of the physical requirements of the Old Covenant that is not necessary for Christians.

Circumcision is strictly a medical issue today. Do what your doctor says!

Romans 2:28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh;

Romans 2:29 but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.

True circumcision is a matter of the heart not just of the cutting away of the flesh. Physical circumcision was meant to picture outwardly what God was doing inwardly.

Paul was talking to the Jews about rites and rituals. He did not say, nor did he mean to say, that there was no longer any difference in God's plan between Jews and Gentiles. He will make it abundantly clear in chapters nine, ten and eleven that God still looks upon the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in a special way.

This passage is *not* teaching that all believers are now Jews, or that the church has replaced Israel.

Paul was simply stating to Jews that their privileges of birth and special revelation and the law were not sufficient to save them.

You may not be aware of it but it is becoming increasingly more popular for evangelical Christians to join what is called the Jewish roots movement.

I'll let one of their proponents define what that means.

If you are a Christian then most likely you grew up in a Christian Church where you were taught to be a follower of Jesus. Seldom does it dawn upon the traditional Christian the fact that Jesus Christ, as depicted in the New Testament, was not a Christian but is depicted as a faithful "Orthodox Jew" with a completely different "religious belief system" than a typical Christian. Fewer still ever think at the ramifications of such a statement and go on unknowingly as a traditional Christian as if they are actually a "follower of Jesus" never once allowing the full weight of such a

statement to hit home where they begin to compare "doctrinally" the Jewish faith with their Christian birth faith. Fewer still every think that a "Jewish Jesus" of the first century could not and would not ever ascribe and adopt many of the same "religious beliefs" which they hold and cherish which has been taught them by Gentile Roman Christianity.

The idea is for evangelical believers like us, who are Gentiles, to understand what it meant to be a 'god-fearer' and convert to worshipping the way Jewish Christians did in the first century.

Truth is, many in the Jewish roots movement are depending upon the tradition of rabbis that came later than the first century. Thus it's not really a return to the Jewish roots so much as it is a turning to some form of Judaism.

Paul would fight these guys! In fact he did fight them and at the church council in Jerusalem early in the Book of Acts these Jewish Christians refused to put Gentiles under *any* part of Judaism.

You are not gaining anything by turning to Judaism. You're losing something - your freedom in Jesus Christ.

Don't be fooled. Having begun in the spirit we will not be made perfect in the flesh.

