

Romans 2:15-29

PREVIOUS

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Modified from Irving L. Jensen's excellent work " Jensen's Survey of the NT "				

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**Romans 2:15-29:
Man's Desperation for God's Good News, Part 4
by Dr. Wayne A. Barber**

The Apostle Paul is a prosecuting attorney. In Romans 1:19-32 he points his finger at the Gentile world and says, "You are guilty as charged." In chapter 2 he walks over to the Jewish world, the pious, religious people who hid behind their pedigree and their profession, and says the same thing, "Guilty as charged." Then in chapter 3 he says, "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God."

There is a judgment coming and every man will be judged, not by his words as much but by his deeds done in the body. True faith produces a lifestyle that is righteous. What does that mean? It is a lifestyle that is surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus, to the standard that He demands of each of us. That is what true salvation produces.

In I Corinthians 6:9-11 Paul talks about the lifestyle of people who are unwilling to surrender to the Lordship of Christ: "Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God."

You see, there is a change that comes in salvation. There is a brand new heart now, a heart that seeks to obey God. We don't enjoy perfection on this earth as believers, but we do enjoy the Holy Spirit working in our life, pulling us to obey the commandments of God.

Galatians 5:19-21 says almost the same thing: "Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God."

Paul's argument is that you cannot live habitually in sin and claim to have received the good news of God. It is what you do in your body, either righteous deeds or unrighteous deeds, that will one day stand in the judgment of God. We have so many people who say, "Oh, I got saved years ago." I am glad for you but what is your life like right now? If there is no lifestyle to show that you have been changed from within, then there is no salvation experience. When a person surrenders their will to the Lordship of Christ and bows before Him, something drastically happens within. Now he has a heart to seek after God. If there is no lifestyle of obedience, then you have nothing to tag yourself on to and to claim that it is a salvation experience.

When I talk about righteous living, I am not talking about perfection. I am talking about predictability. I am talking about consistency. I am talking about a person who, when he sins, confesses that sin because that act of confession and forsaking that sin is as much obedience as anything else. It is a part of his every day pursuit. When you find a person who has had his heart changed pursuing at all times the things of God, he has bowed to the righteous standard of God in his life.

Well, the Apostle Paul wants these Jews to know that they are not living what they are preaching. They are using the law to condemn others, but that same law is going to turn and condemn them.

I want to show you four things in verses 17 through 29. What Paul is trying to get the Jew to realize is the fact that he is guilty before God. How does he develop his case? Well, first of all he wants them to realize the sin of their obstinate pride. I like the word "obstinate" because it is stubborn; it is something that won't move. We can find the sin of their obstinate pride in verses 17-20. When we mention the Jews being proud, we are not talking about all of the Jews. Many Jews have not been that way. Paul was one who repented and came to know the Lord Jesus Christ. But if you will look back in verse 1 of chapter 2, these are the Jews he is talking about. These were the ones hiding behind who they were.

Verse 17 says, "But if you bear the name 'Jew.'" So we know we are talking about Jews here. He says back in verse 1, "Therefore you are without excuse, every man of you who passes judgment, for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things." This was the hypocrisy of these people. They were very proud of their pedigree. "Why, we are of Abraham! We have the covenants! We have the Law!" The Apostle Paul, by asking them questions, was trying to lead them to what they already knew about themselves.

There were three things they were proud of. First of all, they were proud of their name. In verse 17 that involves several things. He says, "But if you bear the name 'Jew.'" The word "Jew" means praised one. Certainly they were to be praised people in the sense that they were the people God had chosen through which the Seed would come, the Seed being Jesus Christ. They were to herald the news of the Messiah to the whole world. But in fact, they had rejected the Lord Jesus, the very Seed that was promised to Abraham. They had relinquished their responsibility in doing that. Everything he says is good in a sense, but it turns out wrong for these people.

Secondly, verse 17 says these Jews "rely upon the Law." The word "rely" there is the word that means to rest upon, to lean upon. Again, if they had done it correctly it would not have been bad, but the way they did it was in the wrong context. All of the good things that God had given to the Jews was to lead them to repentance. But they had become arrogant. They condemned other people. Since they were kindred people to Abraham and since they had the system and they had the Law, they thought that possession of the Law and understanding of the Law somehow exempted them from judgment and guaranteed them the kingdom of God. They were falsely secure.

Thirdly, regarding their name, verse 17 says they "boast in God." Now it is not wrong to boast in God if your life backs it up by your obedience to Him. The word for "boasting" there is *kauchaomai*. It comes from the Greek word for "neck." Moses called them stiff-necked rebellious people. These were proud people. That word has the idea that you are boasting in a braggart sense. You are boasting that in God you have God, the Law and the name Jew. But you see, their life was not backing it up. That is where Paul is headed with all of this. He wants them to see their obstinate pride.

They were proud of their name, and they were also proud of their knowledge. Verse 18 says they "know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law." Paul says, "You know what God wants. You know His intentions." The Law told them exactly what God required. They knew that.

The word "approve" there is the word *dokimazo*, which means to be able to discern what is essential and what is not essential to God. Here were people who had the name. Here were people who had the knowledge. Paul says, "Listen, you have this knowledge, but look at how you are living." He will show them that even though they have the knowledge, they are not living accordingly to it.

Thirdly, they were proud of their superiority. Verses 19 and 20 read, "and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth." The word for "confident" there is the word *peitho*, meaning, "you are persuaded." That wouldn't be bad if you were living up to what you were persuaded about. Paul says to them, "You are persuaded that you need to be a guide, a teacher, etc." When he mentions the words "blind," "immature" and "foolish" he is referring to the Gentiles. Oh, how the Jew loved to condemn the Gentile. The Gentile lived in sin and approved everybody else who lived that way. These Jews were professing one thing and living another lifestyle. They had all the knowledge. They should have been confident that they would have the light. The problem was it was the blind leading the blind.

First of all Paul says, "a guide to the blind." This was very familiar in their terminology. Deuteronomy 27:18 says, "Cursed is he who misleads a blind person on the road." You see, they had to have reliable guides to lead them. If you were blind, you were totally dependent on somebody who would reliably take you to where you wanted to go. He says, "You Jews think that you need to be a guide to the blind. You do. But the problem is, how can you lead them if you yourself are not willing to go the same way?"

Then secondly he says, "a light to those who are in darkness." The Gentiles were blind. Paul says, "The Gentiles are in darkness and you are the light. You are persuaded that you are the light." Again, that is not bad. It was the way they were living that made it bad. Paul is referring to the fact that the Jew thought of himself as one who should shine forth as a light to the Gentile people. The Gentiles worshiped idols, the corruptible man, instead of the incorruptible God. Therefore, the Jews should have been a light to those in the darkness, but they weren't.

Thirdly, Paul says, "a corrector of the foolish." The word corrector there means "to instruct," "to correct," "to chastise." It comes from child training. It almost infers that these Gentiles were children who needed to be instructed. Everything he is saying is right. You had all of this but the condemnation was that they themselves were not living to that which they knew. They knew how to instruct and correct.

Fourthly, they considered themselves "a teacher of the immature." The word for "immature," *nepios*, is the word that means one that cannot speak, a child too young to speak. If you would ask a Gentile about the covenant, the promises, any of that, he couldn't even open his mouth because he was like an infant. He didn't have enough knowledge to say anything. The Jews had all of that light, all of that wisdom. They were able to discern the things of God. But they were proud of it. They were proud of their name, their knowledge and their superiority. The obstinate pride of the Jew is one of the things that Paul is bringing out.

Secondly, they needed to realize the sin of their hypocrisy. The hypocrisy that Paul paints in chapter 2 is so obvious. Here are people who know, but who are not living what they know. Can you see the parallel in our day? You can't hide behind what you know. You can't hide behind the church. You can't hide behind your pedigree. If there is no lifestyle in your life, then you need to get saved and receive the good news of God. It changes your life. There is a righteous lifestyle. You don't use something to condemn other people if you yourself are not willing to live that in your own life.

Paul is going to ask them some questions all the way through chapter 3. The questions that he is asking are leading questions. We already know what they are like in verse 1 of chapter 2. Keep that as an underlying foundation to what we are looking at. Now the first question he asked them in verse 21 reveals their hypocritical teaching: "you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself?" In other words, "You are good at showing others how to live, but can you do it?"

Paul is saying, "What you know has nothing to do with your spirituality if you are not living according to what you know. You are teaching others but you are not willing to live it yourself." You may know it clearly, but if you are not seeking to live it, what good is it doing you? As a matter of fact, what you are teaching and condemning them with is the very thing that is condemning you. You can't hide behind your knowledge.

Secondly, his question reveals their hypocritical desires and their greed. Look at verse 21: "You who preach that one should not steal, do you steal?" You need to understand the culture of that time. They were takers of the worst sort, despite the clear pronouncements of the Mosaic law.

Amos wrote of ancient Judaism in Amos 8:5. He says that they stole by making the bushel smaller and the shekel bigger and by cheating with dishonest scales. They were more crafty in their stealing. As a matter of fact, Malachi said they would rob from God. In Malachi 3:8-9 he accuses fellow Jews of robbing God by withholding some of the tithes and offerings that are owed to Him.

Verse 22 contains his third question, which reveals their hypocritical morals. He says, "You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?" You may ask, "They didn't commit adultery, did they?" I guess they did. Do you remember when they brought the woman caught in adultery and laid her there before Jesus? Jesus wrote on the ground but we don't know what He wrote. Who found her? I would be willing to bet, if I was a betting person, it was one of them who was committing adultery with her. You had to have at least two witnesses to bring an accusation. That is kind of hard to find, unless you are a participant.

Not only that, in Matthew 5:28 Jesus said, "Everyone who looks on a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart." What He was saying is, "You are out there telling all these people something, but you are committing it in your heart every day of your life." What you are condemning others for is going to condemn you. They had hypocritical morals.

In verse 22 his fourth question reveals their hypocritical convictions. He says, "You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?" That is kind of confusing at first. What in the world is he talking about? "Temples," in the plural, can mean nothing of God because they only had one Temple. So what could they be robbing? It must be pagan. Acts 19:37 might give you a clue what he is talking about here. This is when the city clerk is calming down the people at Ephesus, trying to still the crowd: "For you have brought these men [talking about Paul and the others] here who are neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of our goddess."

Now what in the world is going on? Well, the Jewish people of that day abhorred idolatry. They would preach against idolatry, but they loved the profit that came from idolatry. They would go to the temples and steal things. I guess they would take it to the pawnshop. Did they have pawnshops back then? I don't know. But they would somehow make a profit off of that which they condemned. Of course, in their own Law in Deuteronomy 7:25 they are told: "the graven images of their gods you are to burn with fire, you shall not covet the silver or the gold that is on them nor take it for yourselves lest you be snared by it for it is an abomination to the Lord, your God." In other words, how can we condemn worldliness and idolatry if we secretly want to profit from the very thing they are worshipping? It is the same thing.

There are many of us who can point out people who are worldly. Paul is saying, "Look at your own life. Look at what you are seeking after. Look at what you want to profit for. Don't go out and take the profit from what they worship and then condemn idolatry." So he reveals their hypocritical teaching, their desires, their morals, and their convictions.

The fifth question sums it up in verse 23. He asks it in such a way that he already knows the answer and wants them to see it: "You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God?" You know, it is not unbelievers who are causing the problems in our world. It is Christians who dishonor God. The word "dishonor" there means "do not give glory or recognition to." What happens so often is we forget that God is the one who is being dishonored by the fact that we are not willing to live what we are privileged to know and have.

So we have seen the sin of their obstinate pride and the sin of their obvious hypocrisy. Thirdly, they needed to realize the sin of their outrageous witness. When you think about the witness of the Jew who lived such a hypocritical life, then obviously it was their witness that was so outrageous. Verse 24 says, "For 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,' just as it is written." The term "blaspheme" is the word *blasphemeo*. It means to hurt the reputation of someone, to slander someone, to ruin the proper estimate of someone. Now notice they didn't ruin the proper estimate of Judaism. They ruined the Gentiles' estimate of God. The problem in our world is not unbelievers. It is the fact that people who claim to be Christians are not living a righteous lifestyle. This doesn't bring shame upon our name. It brings shame upon His name.

Finally in verses 25-29, there is the sin of their obnoxious ritual. I say it that way because it is obnoxious to me. How many Jews thought that if you were saved by grace, you were kept by the Law? Immediately they tried to get a person circumcised and up under that old fleshly standard to make him spiritual. That is a constant problem that you deal with in the New Testament. They had the Law and they knew things because of the Law, but they were not living up to it. This was the condemnation. Secondly, they had their circumcision and they thought that marked them and set them apart unto God and guaranteed the Kingdom of God. Verse 25 reads, "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."

The first thing that would happen to a male Jewish boy would be that he was circumcised eight days after he was born. That circumcision would mark him. The part of his body that would one day pass the seed on to the next generation was marked. The thing the Jew did not understand was that circumcision had no spiritual power at all. None. It was simply a reminder that they were set apart unto God. If they did not live obedient to God, their circumcision was of no value at all. Certainly it never had any spiritual value.

The Apostle Paul is dealing with that here in verse 25: "but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. If therefore the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?" Paul said that circumcision was to point you to obedience and if he is obeying he doesn't even need circumcision, because he already has the point: he is living as he is supposed to live.

Verse 27 says, "And will not he who is physically uncircumcised [the Gentile], 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?" In other words, Paul was saying, "Hey, you guys. You may have the Law. You may have the mark of circumcision on you, but if you are not obeying and a Gentile receives the Good News of God and obeys Him, then he will turn right around and stand in judgment of you!"

Then Paul says in verse 28: "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh." All

those rites, all of those external things, were to remind people as to whose they were and who they were. If there was no obedient lifestyle, none of that was of any value at all.

Today people are depending on baptism. People say, "I was baptized when I was nine years old. I walked an aisle, prayed a prayer and I got baptized. I am going to heaven." Baptism is an outward symbol of an inward change that has taken place in your heart. It has no spiritual value at all if there is no life to back it up. It becomes a living testimony if there is a life behind it. There are people who think they are guaranteed heaven one day because they were baptized at some time in their life, yet their life has no righteousness to it whatsoever. They are not living up under the standard of God.

Well, Paul would say to them what he was saying to the Jew. "What do you have to hold on to? That which you are using to condemn others has already condemned you. You need to come to receive Christ, the good news of God. There has to be a change of heart, a change of that heart that desires to please God and then a lifestyle that grows and grows and gets better and better. It starts at a significant, spiritual birth experience when a person receives Jesus Christ.

Verse 29 says, "But he is a Jew who is one inwardly." Now I want to make sure you don't make a mistake. There are a lot of people who use these two verses and similar verses in Galatians to come up with the theology that God is through with Israel, that Israel was just a picture of what the church was going to be and the church will replace what they used to be.

I want to remind you of something. Every time Paul speaks, he speaks of the Jew, not of Israel. A Jew is an individual. Israel is a nation. God made a covenant with Abraham that concerned a land, a nation and a seed. He is going to be faithful to keep it. In Romans 9, 10 and 11 Paul shows us that God is not through with Israel yet. The whole plan of Israel was to point people to what it really meant to be a believer in God. Even in the Old Testament, God didn't want external obedience as much as He wanted a heart within that loved Him, the obedience being a reflection of that love and surrender to His will.

Paul says, "But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God." No man can do it. It is what the Spirit of God does. He cuts away the power of the flesh when He enters into a man's heart in the inner man.

I'll tell you what marks you and me: when we come to the point in our life that we want our lives to be inspected by God, we don't really care about what men say, we care about what God says. That is going to make us very unpopular in this world because people don't want to live around people who really love God.

I will tell you something else it will do. It will make us recognizable to all of them. I noticed something years ago. The people who were most offended by a lifestyle of willingness to surrender to Christ, when they became broken and their faith was shattered on the rocks of the circumstances of life, do you know who they turn to first? The ones they can recognize as having something more than just an external religion. The ones who have a heart for God and it is obvious that they have received the Good News of Jesus Christ. Don't ever think that you can anchor your security on a decision you made years ago if there is no lifestyle of righteousness in your life. If there is a root, there is going to be fruit.

In Matthew 3:9 John the Baptist said to the Jews, "God could raise up descendants from the stones if He so desires." They were so proud of their bloodline but did not realize that would not get them into the kingdom of God. Outward symbols mean nothing. The true mark is the inward godly condition of the heart evidenced by a righteous lifestyle. A person who seeks the praise of God and not men is a person who very obviously knows the God of the good news.

I wonder, if you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? That is the indictment to the church today. We talk it and use it to judge others with it, but are we living it ourselves? The righteous lifestyle is what is going to be judged one day by God Himself.