

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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A CIRCUMCISED HEART

Romans 2:17-29

Hermeneutics, you may know, is a fancy word that has to do with the principles of biblical interpretation. One of the cardinal rules of hermeneutics is that before we ask what a particular Bible verse or passage means for us today and how it applies to our lives, we must first discover and understand what it meant in its original context.

To apply this rule to this passage in Romans 2, we must first note that Paul is speaking directly to Jews. He is speaking to people who believe they have a special relationship with God because of their ethnic heritage – because they can trace their ancestry back through one of the 12 tribes of Israel to Jacob and his father Isaac all the way to Abraham, the father of the Jewish people. We must first understand what Paul is saying to Jews before we try to apply the teaching of this passage to our lives as Christians. But we have not done our job as students of the Bible and as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ until we come to grips not only with what it meant to and for its 1st-century audience but also with what it means for us today.

As we have seen, in Romans 1, Paul deals with the case of unbelieving Gentiles who have rejected the knowledge of God available to them and have exchanged the worship of God for idols, the truth of God for a lie, and their natural sexual relations for unnatural ones, which we see not only tolerated but approved and even celebrated in the craziness of our contemporary culture. Then, in the first half of Romans 2, Paul declares God's judgment on the moralists of the world, Jew or Gentile, who consider themselves morally and spiritually superior to others, not realizing or refusing to admit their own sin and their deficit of righteousness before God. Now, beginning in verse 17, Paul takes up the case of the Jews. In particular, he has in mind religiously-devout, self-confident Jews who take pride in their special position and spiritual privileges as God's covenant people. At the risk of getting ahead of myself, let me say that if you substitute "church member" or "Christian" for the word "Jew" in this passage, you will get an idea of how Paul's message here applies to us today. But that is getting ahead of ourselves.

What does Paul say about Jews who take their religion and their privileged position seriously? First, he points to their possession of God's law and their reliance on it in daily life (2:17). Second, he notes their pride in their special relationship with God as His covenant people. He says they "brag about (their) relationship to God" (2:17). Third, because they have the law, because they have been instructed by it, they know God's will. They know what pleases God and they know God's way is superior to every other way to live (2:18). They know that God's way is best.

All these things are true of Christians today, aren't they? We have God's Word in which God has revealed Himself, His truth, and His will for our lives. We affirm the Bible to be fully inspired, wholly authoritative, totally unerring, and the final and only infallible rule for faith and life. In addition, we celebrate our special relationship to God as His adopted sons and

daughters through faith in His Son, our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ. Not only this, we have the light of the knowledge of God's will for our lives, because we have been and continue to be instructed by the teaching of His Word. All of which is to say, Wow! We sure are blessed, aren't we?

The problem for the Jews to whom Paul is speaking, and the problem for us, is when our blessedness becomes a source of pride, and we think our experience of God's grace, our identity as God's children, or our citizenship in the kingdom of God makes us better than other people. Or when we rely on the outward signs or indicators of devotion to God and neglect the inward realities of our heart. It is the kind of thing the Lord Himself decried in Isaiah 29:13, when He said:

“These people come near to me with their mouth
and honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.”

Jesus applied these words to the most religiously-devout Jews of His day, the Pharisees and teachers of the law, who considered themselves morally and religiously superior to everyone else (Matthew 15:1-9; Mark 7:1-13). And they are cautionary words to us today, lest we fall into the same trap.

The Jews, as Paul notes in verses 19 and 20, viewed themselves as “a guide for the blind, a light for those in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, [and] a teacher of infants.” They understood this to be part of their mission in the world, which it was – and is for us today as Christ's followers. The problem is that they didn't practice what they preached. They didn't live up to their knowledge. To which I want to say: Well, who does? Except for Jesus, does anybody totally live out what they preach? I sure don't. Do you? We all fall short daily.

What Paul is getting at here in his indictment of the Jews is the disparity between the observance of the law they professed and the way they actually lived. They believed they were better than they really were. Better than their neighbors. Better than any Gentile. Or, at the least, that is what they wanted people to believe.

The Problem is that when their duplicity or hypocrisy was exposed, when they spoke or acted or treated others in a way that contradicted their supposed devotion to God and His Word, the Gentiles saw right through their self-righteous pretensions. They rebuked them and reviled them and resolved to have nothing to do with them or their God. The result? Verse 24: “God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you” (Cf. Isaiah 52:5).

That still happens today, doesn't it? I'm thinking of the way(s) professing Christians bring dishonor to the name of Christ by our conduct, by our words and attitudes, by our methods and actions, which are detrimental to the message of the gospel and the cause of Christ in the world. Unfortunately, we could come up with plenty of examples. Way too often, Christians give Christianity a bad name by choosing to fight the wrong battles or by conducting ourselves in an unChrist-like way that leads unbelievers to conclude: “If that is what Christians are like, I don't want to have anything to do with them or with their God.”

It seems to me that the recent outrage over Starbucks's red holiday cups which don't say "Merry Christmas" (or anything else) is one example of well-meaning Christians shooting ourselves in the foot, unnecessarily turning people off, and sullyng the name of Christ with unChrist-like behavior. If you want to find a reason to dislike Starbucks, you probably don't have to look too hard. But, seriously, let's not get all worked up about things that don't matter. I'm with Ed Stetzer, who wrote recently about all the fuss: "It's not the job of your barista to share the gospel. It's your job." It's not Starbucks's job. It's *your* job. It's *my* job. It's *our* job to share the gospel. We should be about our Father's business and not be so concerned about Starbucks's holiday cups.

In verse 25, Paul turns to circumcision as a prime example – *the* prime example – of the contrast between the outward adherence to God's law and the inward reality in a person's heart. If you need a definition, circumcision is the removal of the foreskin of the male genital organ. It may be done for religious purposes, as in the case of the Jews, or as a hygienic measure, as in the case in many places around the world, including here in America. For the Jewish people it was the sign of the covenant God established with Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17:9-14). Every Jewish male was to be circumcised when he was eight days old as a sign of inclusion in the covenant community of God's people. Jews were not the only people to practice circumcision in the ancient world. Most of Israel's neighbors also did it. Jeremiah 9:25 names the Egyptians, Edomites, Ammonites, and Moabites as others who practiced circumcision. For the Jews, though, it had a religious significance that set it apart from other nations. From the time of God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17, circumcision was to be the physical mark signifying the inclusion of every Jewish male in the covenant blessings and obligations. For the Jews, it became a source of ethnic or religious pride, a symbol of their election and privilege as God's chosen people.

Unfortunately, for many of the Jews, the symbol (circumcision) became disconnected from the thing it signified (a heart devoted to the Lord and His ways). It became, for many, an empty ritual. That this was true in Old Testament times is indicated by Moses' plea to the people of Israel to "circumcise your hearts and do not be stiff-necked (i.e., to stubbornly seek your own way) any longer" (Deuteronomy 10:16), as well as by Jeremiah 4:4, which says: "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem."

As a symbol of the covenant between God and the people of Israel, circumcision was a non-negotiable. But by itself, Paul says, circumcision doesn't produce or guarantee a right relationship with God. Why? Because physical circumcision is an external matter, and a right relationship with God is a matter of the heart. Circumcision (physical) and covenant faithfulness to God (spiritual) are meant to go together. When there is a disconnect where covenant faithfulness to God is lacking, the physical act of circumcision loses its value and meaning. That is Paul's conclusion here in Romans 2, and it was truly radical. Being circumcised doesn't mean a blessed thing if it is not accompanied by a heart for God and a life of obedience to His Word.

In fact, says Paul, God prefers an uncircumcised Gentile with a heart for God and His commandments over a circumcised Jew who just goes through the motions and thinks that is all that is needed to satisfy God.

The question of the importance of circumcision was at the center of controversy in the New Testament church. In fact, it was the central issue that led to the first “general assembly” of the Christian church, the council at Jerusalem in the year A.D. 50. You can read about it in Acts 15. Some Jewish-background Christians were teaching that Gentiles must be circumcised and live according to the law of Moses in order to be saved. So the apostles and elders met to resolve the question, concluding, as Peter said, that God makes no distinction between Jews and Gentiles, purifying the hearts of both by faith, apart from any works of the law (Acts 15:8-11) – meaning that neither circumcision nor adherence to all the rest of the Jewish rituals were requirements for salvation. Salvation, for Jews and Gentiles alike, is totally a gift of grace that comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will.

Paul had already argued passionately against the necessity of circumcision as a pre-requisite for salvation in his letter to the Galatians, written about a year before the Jerusalem Council. A faction in the church known as Judaizers insisted that Gentile Christians had to submit to the Jewish laws and traditions in addition to believing in Christ for salvation. This is what Paul wrote in Galatians 5 to the Gentile believers in the Galatian churches: “I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised [because you think it is necessary for salvation] Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to everyone who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by [obedience to the] law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Galatians 5:2-6).

Paul returns to the subject at the very end of the letter, in Galatians 6:15, where he says: “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation” – or, to put it another way, what matters is a changed heart, a heart transformed by God’s grace to us in Christ.

It is the changed heart – the circumcised heart, as Paul refers to it in Romans 2:29 – and not the outward sign of circumcision that counts with God. A true Jew, as Paul uses the term in verses 28 and 29, is not a person with the right ancestry or who strives to win God’s approval by observing all the do’s and don’ts of the Jewish law and traditions. A true Jew is not one who is obsessed, like the Pharisees, with legalistic rules and outward rituals. Nor is a real Christian a person who tries to impress other people with his or her goodness. A real Jew – or a real Christian – is a person with a circumcised heart. This circumcision of the heart is not done by human hands with a knife. It is surgery performed on the soul by the Spirit of God.

A circumcised heart is a heart in which true, saving faith resides, a heart redeemed and changed by God’s unchanging grace.

A circumcised heart – the kind of heart that brings delight to the heart of God – is a heart that loves God above all else, and trusts God above all else for this life and for eternity.

A circumcised heart is a heart that loves to worship God and desires to glorify Him in all things.

A circumcised heart is also a thankful heart. A heart filled with gratitude to God. Not just in the season of Thanksgiving, but all through the year, every year, in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health, in good times and hard times. Because there is never a time when it is not time to give thanks to God.

A circumcised heart is also a gracious and generous heart, because those whose hearts have been changed by God's grace must show grace to others in response to the grace we have received. And a gracious heart is a generous heart, ready and willing to give generously to honor God and to bless others.

A circumcised heart is a heart that loves people with the love of Jesus – not just people we like or people who are like us, not just people who think the way we do, but also people we find it hard if not impossible to like, people whose beliefs and lifestyles are very different from ours. We are called, you and I, to this kind of love because we belong to Jesus, and this is the kind of love He has for people all around us.

Let me ask you: (This is where the hermeneutical question hits home.)

Do you have a circumcised heart, a heart changed by Jesus and His love for you? It is not a matter of outward observances or appearances. It is not a matter of keeping a set of rules and regulations, or trying really hard to be good. It is a matter of trust in God and surrender to His loving and gracious rule in your life. It is about following Him at every moment in everything and letting Him have His way in all you think and say and do.

Do you have a circumcised heart? Lord, let it be so. Amen.