



International Bible Study Commentary

Verse-by-Verse Bible Lessons Thru the Bible

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Lesson 4

Romans 2:17-29 Commentary

New Revised Standard Version

(Romans 2:17) But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God

In Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapter 1, Paul addressed and described the Gentiles (those without the Bible or the Law of God revealed through Moses). He showed some of the consequences when a person or a society turns away from the true God. In chapter 2, Paul turned to the Jews to show that everyone has broken God's law; therefore, everyone needs Jesus the Messiah as their Savior and Lord. Unlike the Gentiles, as the basis of their relationship with God the Jews trusted in the fact that they had been especially chosen by God and given God's law through Moses. They also boasted in the belief that they were better than others because the Gentiles did not know God. They mistook knowing some facts about the true God with knowing God. They boasted in being special with God because of their race and superior knowledge. As Jews, they thought they were superior to others, as did the Greeks, who called other people barbarians.

(Romans 2:18) and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law,

Paul used a very big "if" three times in Romans 2:17-19. "If" you say and do these things. Do you claim to know God and the will of God? Are you taught by the Law of God and the Scriptures? Do you approve of the moral law and its requirements? Do you believe knowing God's Law makes you and your ideas and actions superior to the beliefs and behaviors of those who have turned from the true God? Do you claim to understand God and His law and that understanding makes you better to those who are not Jews?

(Romans 2:19) and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness,

The Jews had convinced themselves that because they had the Bible (the Hebrew Scriptures) and because they had studied and applied the Law of God to almost every area and tiny detail of human life that they could guide the spiritually blind Gentiles, who they considered beneath them. With their superior understanding, they thought they could improve the outward behavior of Gentiles as a light reveals the true condition of a person or their situation. When they were not trying to avoid any contact with “Gentile sinners,” as they called them, they tried to lead the Gentiles to fear and obey God as they understood God.

(Romans 2:20) a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth,

The Jews believed that the Law of God as revealed by Moses embodied knowledge and truth. In contrast, Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Paul and the Jews who followed Jesus as Lord and Savior knew that Jesus (not the written Law of God) perfectly embodied and revealed knowledge and truth for our salvation, “grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). Jesus’ words and example taught them as the Holy Spirit filled them and led them to apply Jesus’ words in their daily life and behavior, and in their relationships with God and others. Jesus and the Holy Spirit taught them the true meaning and application of the Old Testament, but they kept the focus on Jesus, who fulfilled the Law and the Prophets. The Jews emphasized their interpretations of the Law of God, but Paul showed and emphasized that they did not obey the Law of God and stood guilty before God no matter how many foolish people and children they thought they taught—they also needed Jesus and salvation through faith in Him.

(Romans 2:21) you, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal?

Paul insisted that knowing some facts about God and the requirements of God's Law were not enough to be right with God. Jesus had warned the scribes and Pharisees about the consequences of their hypocrisy. Jesus preached, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence" (Matthew 23:23 and 25). Paul warned that the Jews, who taught others the Law of God, needed to both know and obey the Law of God. They needed to teach by good examples as well as by words; otherwise, their knowledge of the Law was no advantage to them or others, but very harmful. Their knowledge of the Law made them more accountable to God. Some taught others not to steal, while they themselves stole—and did even worse.

(Romans 2:22) You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples?

Paul did not have room in his scroll to list all their hypocritical inconsistencies. He listed only some examples of what some people said and what they did with regard to the moral law of God. Whether it is stealing in the temple of an idol or not, stealing is always wrong. It may be that some Jews thought it was okay to steal at the temple of an idol because it was only an idol. They probably stole some of the gifts that were left for idols by their pagan worshipers, thinking the idol could do nothing to stop them or punish them afterwards. They probably invented many false reasons to try to justify breaking the moral laws of God depending on the situation (situational ethics). Adultery involves stealing another man's wife or another woman's husband. In verse 24, Paul wrote of their stealing the honor that only God deserves from others by their immoral behavior and bad example.

(Romans 2:23) You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?

Some of the Jews boasted that God had given them His Law, because God considered them special and superior to others. They falsely reasoned that God had set them apart from all others because they were better than others. Then, they dishonored God. Regarding their relationship with God, they disregarded God's lordship over them when they broke God's Law by intentionally doing what God condemned and forbade by His Law. They probably stole from the Gentiles in numerous ways and took unjust advantage over them in business dealings; then, their victims cursed both them and the God they supposedly represented.

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

Paul summarized Ezekiel 36:20-22 and perhaps Isaiah 52:5 (in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Septuagint, which the Romans probably used). The Jews had abused the Gentiles in a variety of immoral and unjust ways; therefore, the Gentiles assumed that God approved of their evil conduct against them. The behavior of the Jews influenced the Gentiles to hate the true God for God's supposed injustice as He permitted the Jews to steal from them without justly punishing them for their immoral treatment of them and stopping them.

(Romans 2:25) Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.

The required ritual of circumcision for male Jews was a part of the ceremonial law, and some Jews thought that the performance of ritual duties would gain them merit with God and mitigate their disobedience of the moral law. However, Paul wrote that if they broke the moral law their ritual performances were of no value as a substitute for obeying the moral law, the law of love, or of value in any other way. Circumcision symbolized the fact that God had set the Jews apart from sin to live holy lives as God's

representatives. Circumcision had value as a visible sign if the Jew was committed to living holy and wholly for God, but it was of no value if a person lived an immoral life contrary to the revealed will of God.

(Romans 2:26) So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?

Paul did not write that perfect obedience to God's law had ever been achieved or could be achieved by anyone except Jesus Christ. For the sake of his argument, Paul wanted his readers to suppose this might happen. If a Gentile obeyed the moral law (loved God and others in word and deed), they would be regarded as circumcised even though they did not bear the outward physical marks of circumcision. Their holy behavior would indicate that they were set apart for God and from sin. Their actions would show that they were circumcised in their heart.

(Romans 2:27) Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law.

Paul concluded Romans chapter 1 by writing that immoral people approve the behavior of those who act immorally. When a moral person obeys God, whether circumcised or not, they will by their outward behavior and sometimes by their open rebukes condemn lawbreakers and sinners. When a Jew breaks the law, a moral person will not give special consideration to the fact that the Jew is circumcised and has the Hebrew Scriptures; rather, he will especially condemn the lawbreaker who has the special advantage of knowing the Law of God but disobeying God. Possessing the Law of God and being circumcised while disobeying God will make a person a lawbreaker and even more accountable to God because he knew right from wrong and chose knowingly to sin, rebel, and disobey God.

(Romans 2:28) For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical.

Throughout his ministry, Paul preached that a person did not need to be circumcised in the flesh to become a faithful follower of Jesus the Messiah. Mere external conformity to the ceremonial law of God does not reveal the inward moral character of someone or the state of their heart. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared that obedience to the moral law involved our thought and heart life as well as our outward behavior. We sin when we contemplate and do in our mind the sin that we would like to do, and would like to do if we had the opportunity, and would like to do if we were assured that we would not be caught or held responsible. A temptation is not a sin, but it can lead to sin if we do not turn to Jesus Christ and ask Him to save us from the temptation to sin.

(Romans 2:29) Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.

In a right relationship with God, a Jew is not a person who bears the outward marks of circumcision on his body or has Jewish ancestors, because “The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). In a right relationship to God, a true Jew, a faithful follower of Jesus Christ, has inward characteristics that sets them apart from the profane and sinful ways of the world, the flesh, and the devil. A true Jew lives as a moral person in his heart as well as in his outward behavior: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). Jeremiah told the Jews to circumcise their hearts: “Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, or my wrath will flare up and burn like fire because of the evil you have done—burn with no one to quench it” (Jeremiah 4:4). The Holy Spirit circumcises the heart of a true follower of Jesus Christ, so true believers turn to God in Jesus Christ to be changed, to be born again, to live as God intends, to live according to the moral law that the Holy Spirit helps all true believers in Jesus Christ obey. The Holy Spirit enables those who

turn to Jesus Christ in faith and repentance to obey the moral law inwardly and outwardly. And while Christians will not be praised by unbelievers for their commitment to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and for obeying the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures, they will receive praise from God. Paul always argued that the followers of Jesus Christ do not need to be physically circumcised. And John revealed in the Book of Revelation the true relationship and responsibilities of the followers of Jesus Christ: “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth” (Revelation 5:10). God gives us true praise when He calls us and appoints us to serve Him on earth as in heaven in the power of the Holy Spirit who indwells us.

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. If you do not rely on the law, what do you rely on for your salvation. Describe your answer.
2. The Jews thought that in the law they had the embodiment of knowledge and truth (Romans 2:20). Do you agree or disagree? Give a reason for your answer.
3. Read Romans 2:23 again. How might you rephrase that verse to teach it to a persistently disobedient Christian?
4. Would you agree or disagree with the rephrasing or application of Romans 2:25 below?

“Baptism has value if you love and follow Jesus Christ, but if you walk away from Christ you are acting like one who was never baptized.”
5. Do you think Romans 2:29 could refer to both Gentile and Jewish Christians? Why?

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