

ROMANS BIBLE STUDY

Romans 2:17-29

Lesson #5

Introduction

For the past several lessons we've been discussing Paul's ongoing description of the condition of unregenerate mankind. We said that chapter 1, verse 18 began a long description of the condition of the human heart. There are those who outright deny God, and there are those who claim to believe Him but then don't choose to obey Him with their lives and practices. Paul is telling us that there's no difference between these two, in so far as their ultimate outcome before God, because it isn't what we say, but what we **do** that God uses to make His eternal judgement. (2:13)

Many people, even some genuine believers, perceive this as a contradiction, as an outright assault on the doctrine of justification by faith alone, apart from the works of the Law. But it's difficult to understand how they can come to this conclusion. What is so difficult about the understanding that what we truly believe will directly affect what we actually do? If we really believe that a bridge will collapse if we drive our car over it, will we still drive over it anyway, will we; because after all, it isn't what we do but what we believe that really counts? Using this example, if you tell someone that the bridge will collapse if they drive over it, how will you know if they really believe you? The answer is obvious isn't it? It is actions, deeds, behaviors, that demonstrate what we truly believe. Many might thank you for your concern, and say they believe your warning, but No one who really does believe your warning about the bridge will go right ahead and drive over it anyway. Whether they drive over it, or turn around, depends upon whether they **really believe your warning**, and anyone who still drives over it anyway, even when they say they believe you, will surely perish in the collapse, because their actions were not in accordance with their words. Do you see what the scriptures say, that deeds are the expression of belief, of faith, and the deeds tell the true story, even when words do not. The fact that deeds and belief are inseparably connected should be a "no brainer," but instead they're often considered a contradiction. Faith and works are complimentary according to the scriptures, not contradictory, as some perceive them. Again, faith and works are complimentary, not contradictory. While it's true that works are never a substitute for authentic faith, it is equally true that authentic faith is always made effectual by its works. Man is justified by faith alone, and the veracity of that faith will be evidenced by his works, just as our father Abraham's was.

I've taken the time to discuss this issue because in these verses that we're examining now, Paul is making precisely this distinction. That the claims of faith of those religious hypocrites were exposed as bogus by their perpetual and unrepentant lives of disobedience to the commandments of God. They honored Him with their words, but their hearts were far from Him, as evidenced by their practices. This is about as precise a description as any that can be made of most of what passes itself off as Christianity today. In these verses, Paul was referring to Judaism, because it had been the recognized religion of God, but it had mutated into a system of rituals and ceremonies that had replaced faith and obedience. And time has proven this to be a consistent pattern of human behavior, irregardless of nationality or ethnicity. Paul is making it painfully clear that being a Jew back then, or being a Christian right now, is not about what we say, but about what we do, and it's our actions, not our titles, that God uses to make the distinctions. Israel, for the most part, completely ignored the endless warnings of the prophets that God sent, and Christianity, for the most part, ignores the warnings of today, by the men that God is using as modern day spokesmen on behalf of His righteousness. I have much more to say on this, but I'll wait and do it after the specific verses we're about to read. I've titled this lesson:

it's So Easy to be Self-Deceived

17 But if you bear the name "Jew" and rely upon the Law and boast in God, 18 and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law, 19 and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, 20 a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth, 21 you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? 22 You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? 23 You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? 24 For "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you," just as it is written.

25 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. 26 So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? 27 And he who is physically uncircumcised, 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? 28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. 29 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.

Rom 2:17-29 (NASB)

Now, looking specifically at:

Verses 17-21a:

17 But if you bear the name "Jew" and rely upon the Law and boast in God, 18 and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law, 19 and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, 20 a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth, 21 you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself?

The "Jew" at that time represented the religious system established by God. It was the nation of Israel that had received the Laws and statutes of God, and who had been chosen as God's own people. Because of this, the Jews became proud, even arrogant, and believed that they were special because of something about them that was superior to the other nations and ethnic groups. They had forgotten their humble beginnings, and the provisions of the covenant that God had made with them, and they had become self-deceived. To them, simply being a Jew was God's endorsement of acceptance, and their feeble efforts of obedience to a perverted set of His Commandments were assumed sufficient to maintain God's favored status for them.

Therefore, their leaders boasted in their knowledge of His Laws, and their approval of His ways as they confidently instructed others about those things the Law prescribes. They were self-confident that their knowledge and familiarity with God's Laws made them a suitable guide to others who were spiritually blind, and a light of truth to those who were in darkness as to the things of God. They were quick to give advice and provide instruction to the immature, and correction to the foolish, because they knew the Law very well, and could recite it by memory.

Now, up to this point there's nothing wrong with all of this. It is in fact honorable and good to know God's will, and His Commandments, and to share that knowledge with others whenever possible. But, unfortunately, that isn't the end of Paul's description. After saying all those honorable things, he then begins to examine their application in the lives of those very same individuals who have all this knowledge and understanding. Paul then asks the piercing question: *you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself?* Ouch, that's sure not something any teacher of scriptures wants to hear, is it? That one sentence speaks volumes. That one question suggests an answer that's not at all flattering. And Paul doesn't ask it without a good reason. Because that was a very accurate picture of what Judaism had become, and it is, unfortunately a very accurate description of what Christianity has become also. A religion of words that are not supported by appropriate deeds and actions of conformity to those words. A religion that supposes that academic knowledge can be a suitable substitute for deeds and actions. That simply knowing what's right, and confessing that knowledge is sufficient for salvation, even if we don't live in reasonable accordance to it. That principle didn't work for the Jews and it will not work for the Christians. (Mat 7:21-23; 1Jn 2:3-6)

It's so easy to be convinced by persuasive preachers that our continued practice of disobedience to God is not a real problem because the blood of Jesus has paid the price for our sins. But this idea has a serious flaw in its popular application. While the blood of Jesus does cover the sins of His elect, those who truly believe in Him, at the very same time, the deeds of those who claim this belief are testifying as to the authenticity, the veracity of that claim of belief. The blood of Jesus only covers the sins of those who really believe, and the **deeds** of every human are the **proof** of that claim of faith. This is Paul's message in these verses. Any who still have the "old man" consistently calling all the plays are not really born again, and their claim of faith is exposed as false by their heart's desires and their life's choices.

I have heard countless preachers, of the liberal ilk, explain why our behaviors are not really important, and even heard it said that we should expect to get worse rather than better. And I understand why this preaching is so popular and easily

accepted. Because even the true believers know how often we fail, and how often we sin against God, even when we don't want that to happen and hate ourselves when we allow it. But there's a monumental difference between **committing** a sin and **practicing** a sin, as we discussed in our study of 1st John. Born again believers will still commit sin because our flesh is sinful and can't be redeemed or reformed, but we have been freed from our bondage to the flesh by a new Spirit, that enables the true believers to break the pattern of sin and begin to practice righteousness as the new pattern of our lives. We'll discuss this in detail in chapter 6.

But the immature who struggle with sin the most, and even more, the self-deceived who profess to be Christians but show no fruits of that profession in their affections and behaviors, are eager to hear someone preach that our behaviors are not really what's important, just as long as we say, with as much enthusiasm as we can muster up, that we believe in Jesus. But the real question isn't about faith versus works, but about whether our claim of faith is real or just contrived. And works is the most reliable means of making that evaluation, according to Paul's and John's and James' epistles.

Paul is still continuing to describe the situation of fallen mankind, which he started in chapter 1, at verse 18, and he's subdivided that description into those who outright deny God, and those who profess to know Him but prove they really do not but their deeds, (Titus 1:16) which he's describing in this section of verses that we're examining now. The Jews of that time wanted teachers that would tell them what they wanted to hear, and that's what they got. And today we have the same thing. Just before his death, Paul told his disciple Timothy what to expect, and gave him a solemn charge:

1 I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: 2 preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. 3 For the time will come when they [the churches] will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, 4 and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. 2 Tim 4:1-4 (NASB)

The reason it's so easy to be fooled is because so many of us want to be fooled. We would rather hear a pleasant lie than a harsh truth. And being told that simply believing that Jesus paid the price for our past and our present and our ongoing perpetual sins is a great message to hear. It means we don't have to do anything about our sins. We are free to continue to practice them as long as we're willing to admit to them as being sins, so that the blood of Jesus can pay for them. This was the subject of one of my teachings on 1st John 1:9, where I spoke of preachers who misuse this verse as a virtual license to sin, as long as you keep confessing it. Those who believe in Jesus Christ do still fall into sin, and when they do so, and confess, and seek repentance, they are forgiven by His life's blood, shed on our behalf, but nowhere do the scriptures permit, or even suggest, that professing believers have a licence to intentionally, and willfully, and perpetually continue to practice sin and get away with it. There is no such doctrine taught in the Bible, this is what Paul said in verse three that we studied last week, and to suggest that there is sinful and wrong and very dangerous. (Mat 5:17-20; 18:6) Do we remember last week's lesson, where we also read that the kindness of God leads us to repentance. (2:4) And my comment that God leads us to repentance so that He can grant us forgiveness without violating His own righteousness and holiness, and, so that He doesn't end up condoning sin.

So many people attend modern Christian churches, where they hear another "come to Jesus by faith alone" message preached every week, but they rarely, if ever, hear about God's commandment to turn away from our sins and follow His Son Jesus in complete submission to His teachings and authority over our lives. The majority of professing Christianity has adopted another gospel, not taught in scripture, that appeals to the flesh rather than the Spirit. And unlike that "other gospel" of which Paul spoke to the Galatians, that added works as a mandatory **cause** of salvation, our "other gospel" removes works as a mandatory **effect, or fruit** of salvation. Both are wrong, and both constitute scriptural heresy. I suppose that there are some who just don't grasp the distinction, but the vast majority do grasp it, they just don't like it, because it means that mankind is not free to continue to **practice** sin under the cloak of the shed blood of Jesus Christ. (1Jn 2:3-4) The lovingkindness of God is demonstrated by His forgiveness of our sin **and** His leading us away from the continued practice of it, through repentance **from** it.

Because the Christian religion is filled with preachers who are skilled at "feel good" sermons, that tell their followers that "God loves them and has a wonderful plan for their lives" and that plan is to make our lives comfortable, and rewarding,

and healthy, and prosperous. To make us feel good about ourselves because Jesus has forever abolished sin and punishment, and now He wants us to be the happiest and most prosperous and most popular people on this earth. Who wouldn't like to hear this message? What's not to like? But the question is, Is that what Jesus preached? And the answer is a resounding "NO" it's not what Jesus preached. It's not the gospel according to Jesus or according to the New Testament Apostles and other writers. It's another gospel, custom tailored to fit a sin loving humanity and tare filled churches, that don't want the truth because they don't want righteousness, so the only gospel they'll tolerate is a perverted gospel, that tolerates their sinful desires and absolves them of God's wrath and judgement under a cloak of love that never passes judgement. And all of this happens under a banner that proclaims the name of Jesus Christ, even though their works deny everything that He teaches. (Titus 1:16) Rightly and justly will Jesus Himself declare to their faces that He never knew them, and order them to depart from His presence, forever. (Mat 7:23) This is the inescapable fate of all false religions, and false proclaimers of the real one as well. Any and all claims of knowing God, and faith in Jesus Christ, that did not produce a resultant lifestyle of obedience to His commandments will prove to have been fraudulent and worthless when subjected to His final evaluation and eternal Judgment. (Mat 7:13-29)

These verses from Matthew speak of faith in Jesus Christ as the narrow gate to salvation, and obedience to his commandments as the very narrow and agonizingly difficult path trodden by the true believer. (Vv 13-14) They warn us of false teachers, and tell us how to recognize them, by the fruits they produce. (Vv15-20) And they portray obedience rather than profession as the litmus test of authentic faith. (Vv 21-23) And then they liken our actual observance of His commandments as a foundational rock on which we build our lives and behaviors, which will withstand the raging floods of testing, as opposed to shifting sands (man's ideas and opinions) that will end up in destruction. (Vv 24-29)

In summary, Paul is saying that our trust in our knowledge, in our tradition, in our titles, or in our perceived wisdom and abilities is meaningless unless all of these produce the necessary results. And what is that result? It is a genuine faith that passes the test of works that are in keeping with that faith. Calling themselves Jews did not save the Jews, and calling ourselves Christians will not save us who use this Name, unless the resultant effects prove the authenticity of that claim. We are not perfect, that's why Jesus died, but we are most definitely changed. We are most definitely sanctified and set apart, and our pattern of desires, and affections, and behaviors is showing a progressively growing Christlikeness, because the holy Spirit has been charged with that task. (1Pet 1:2) This is not the case for fallen, unregenerate man, which is Paul's whole case in point here in these verses that we're now examining. Paul is building up his case for the total depravity of all mankind, and we'll see and examine that when he finishes in chapter 3, verse 20. But for now, we continue with the next verses:

Verses 21(b) - 24:

You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? 22 You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? 23 You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? 24 For "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you," just as it is written. After making the point about those teachers who knew the Law, and considered themselves guides to the blind, and a light to those in darkness, and correctors of the foolish, and teachers of the immature; and then asking them if they did the same things, Paul continues with the examples. He asks them if, after preaching that one should not steal, do they themselves steal? Do they themselves commit adultery, do they end up swindling money from idols temples? In other words, are they gross hypocrites. Do they think that they can do those things they preach that God forbids and escape His judgement because they call themselves Jews and were circumcised when they were born?

Then Paul narrows the focus even more. He asks them if, after publically proclaiming the Laws of God, and teaching them to others, do they end up dishonoring God by their own flagrant disobedience to those very same Laws that they preached in God's name? This is really where it gets serious doesn't it? If we dishonor ourselves that's sad, but we already know that we are mortal and fallible creatures, and we'll all fail occasionally. But what if that failure involves the good name of our Savior as well?

I suppose that there's very little that's more disappointing and saddening than to see another scandal on the evening news about a famous Christian preacher that has been caught in a sexual scandal, or in dishonesty, or drug abuse.

Or some other impropriety. Not so much because it damages his own reputation, (not suggesting that that's unimportant) but much more because of how it reflects on the name of Jesus Christ. How it reflects on the whole of Christianity, and provides opportunity for ridicule for those who dislike the name of Jesus. Christians can perform infinite works of charity and benevolence and never get a word of praise from the news media, but let one person fall into sin and it's on the front page for weeks. The news media delights in such opportunities, and even creates false opportunities by attaching the name of Christian to every right wing or conservative organization that falls into trouble, even if they can't even spell the word Christian. But that's another story.

Here Paul is speaking of the Jews who had the Laws of God and then, over time, came to live in gross disobedience to those Laws, and the pagan nations used this as a means to mock God. If we publically proclaim ourselves as Christians then we have, whether intentionally or not, attached His name to our behaviors, and what we do, or don't do, involves His holy Name as well as our own. When one contemplates this it makes us both proud and nervous. We're proud to have our names attached to the name of Jesus Christ, but at the same who is up to such a task? Who among men can live up to such a standard? I'll be the first to confess that I surely can't, although I certainly wish I could. But, nevertheless we must be keenly aware that our actions as Christians are always under scrutiny, not just by Jesus Christ himself, but by a society that dislikes His name and looks for any and every opportunity to dishonor Him through the behaviors of His own people. So, it's very important to maintain our morality, our honesty, and our integrity, not just for the sake of ourselves, but for the sake of the Name of Jesus Christ our Savior. Now, let's look at our next group of verses:

Verses 25-29:

25 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. 26 So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? 27 And he who is physically uncircumcised, 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? 28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. 29 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.

In these 5 verses Paul simply restates exactly what he just said in verse 13, but he uses a well known example this time. In verse 13 Paul said it was not the hearer's of the Law that were just before God, but the doer's of the Law would be justified. Here he attaches the physical example of circumcision. This can be an uncomfortable subject, but it is the physical sign that God chose for the males among the Jews to demonstrate their commitment to the covenant of the Law. It was perhaps something like a signature on a contract document, one that they couldn't forget they signed because it was always with them. It had become, to the Jews a sign of God's acceptance, and of true religion, and simply having the sign had become to them all that was necessary. But the sign was intended to mean something. And that something that the sign was supposed to mean was that the Jews would keep the Commandments of God, and in return, God would bless them and make them prosper. But that very same contract had language that said that if they ceased to obey God's commandments then God would bring His wrath and judgement upon them. A very simple contract (Covenant) to understand, and circumcision was the outward sign that they understood, and agreed to be bound by, the terms of that contract, that Covenant.

But what had taken place is that the Jews had slowly redefined the terms of that contract. They didn't necessarily abandon it, they just redefined what it said, and how they interpreted the Laws that it put forth. By doing this they could keep the illusion that they were still living in keeping with the covenant, and should be able to expect God's continued blessings. And were discouraged and even insulted when God didn't keep up what they perceived as His end of the bargain. Where were all the blessings that God was supposed to be providing? Why was He ignoring His commitment of prosperity? The thought that they were living in gross violation of the intent of nearly every one of God's Laws was the farthest thing from their minds. The thought that they were guilty of great sin, and deserving of God's wrath was nowhere to be found.

How commonplace this practice is. How many times have you heard someone sarcastically say "where was your God when so and so happened? I thought God was supposed to be a loving God, but yours seems to be just the opposite. Why in the world would He allow such tragedies to happen, if He is indeed a loving God? The people who make these comments don't have any idea, not even a clue, of just how incredibly fortunate they are that God is a loving God, or they

would already be suffering His wrath and judgement for the lives of disobedience they are living every day of the lives. The real question is not “why does God allow tragedies,” but why does He limit them to so very few? He has commanded that all humanity obey His commandments or suffer the penalty of His judgement, but very few are willing to see that humanity is **not** living in obedience to His commandments. Not even in close proximity. Humanity, and especially religion, believes they’re worthy of blessing for the way they are living, when they should be on their knees in thanks to God for His continued patience and restraint from dealing with them as they really deserve. Mankind has truly mastered the fine art of self-deception, and self-justification, and is able to convince himself that just about anything is acceptable, if it’s viewed from the right perspective. We are spin doctors extraordinaire. We are the good guys and God is the bad Guy, just as Satan suggested to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They fell for it, and we, meaning unregenerate humanity, are stilling doing the same thing today. We do not accept our sin as being sin, and we will not confess our innate depravity.

Do you remember what we discussed in earlier lessons that the road to perdition has a first cause, a specific starting point, and we identified that cause, that starting point as not believing what God says. Paul is saying over and over, and using well known examples to make it abundantly clear that humanity must obey God by their actions. Our lives must be in conformity with His commandments or we will not be justified, and we will not enter the kingdom of God. It is our deeds, not our words, that God uses to make His determination of whether our claim of faith is genuine. That’s what Paul means in these verses. He says that the Jew, who relies on his circumcision, and his heritage for his salvation, but does not actually keep the Laws, will be judged by Gentiles who do not have the physical circumcision, nor the Jewish heritage, nor the written Laws, but they ended up keeping those Laws anyway because they were written on their hearts. These verses are too clear to be misunderstood. You may not like them, but you cannot claim that you don’t understand them.

I know that there are stubborn diehards who blindly hold on to the justification by faith alone teaching to mean that salvation has nothing whatsoever to do with what we do, but only what we believe. But are these foolish one’s too blind to see that the holy scriptures teach that God uses our deeds as the means for determining the true believer from the false professor? Many and diverse are those who claim with their words to have faith in God, so God separates the wheat from the tares, the true from the false, by their deeds. The deeds are the visible fruits of faith, and God judges the fruits because they are reliable, where words are not. Justification **is** by faith alone, and deeds are that which prove the legitimacy or illegitimacy of that faith. This is the teaching of the whole bible, and twisting or spinning it to try to make it otherwise is to teach God’s children to accept the practice of sin. Grave and severe are the biblical warnings against teaching God’s children to stumble in their walk by accepting the practice of various sins. (Mt 18:6; Mk 9:42; Lk 17:2)

Conclusion:

It isn’t those who say they are religious, who say they have faith, who are the true children of God, it is those who prove it by a pattern of consistent obedience, by confession and repentance upon falling, and total belief in, and acceptance of, what God has said, without twisting it, or spinning it, or justifying disobedience to it. Yes, we all still sin, and many use this to try to nullify the word of God, and justify the unrepentant acceptance of various sins, but our inability to perfectly keep God’s divine Laws does not render any of those Laws null or void, it just proves the weakness of the flesh of mankind, and demonstrates the scope of our need for forgiveness and His imputed righteousness. God will not ask anyone what they **believe** at His judgement seat, He will ask them what they have **done**, and from that **He will tell them** what they really believed.

If you consider yourself religious, or call yourself a Christian, but you know you haven’t really made much effort to learn or live in obedience to the Laws of God, you might think you’ll be there at His judgement seat to tell God what you believe, but in fact you’ll be there to hear God pronounce to you what you believe, because He’s seen your deeds, and made His irrefutable determination from them. It’s not a matter of faith **or** works, it’s a matter of faith **by** works. We’ll continue next week. To Him alone be the glory, forever. Amen.

Narrow Gate Baptist Church, Miami
Robert Andrews, Pastor
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