

Circumcision of the Heart

Romans 2:17-29

Such an interesting phrase, isn't it—circumcision of the heart. In a literal sense, it is nonsense, of course. Circumcision is an outward act, a surgical procedure to cut away the male foreskin. In Old Testament Israel, it was the sign of the covenant. It was the identifying mark of a true Jew, an Israelite. As a nation, the Israelites were often called simply, "the circumcised." Circumcision is what made a man a Jew. A Gentile, on the other hand, would be identified as "uncircumcised." It's one or the other, obviously, externally, physically.

Specifically, we read from the OT that every male had to be circumcised. It was required. It was the sign of God's covenant with Israel, and the identification of those who belonged to God's covenant people the Jews.

Gen. 17:9 "And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. 10 This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; 11 and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. 12 He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. 13 He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. 14 And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."

Here in Romans 2 Paul is taking that very familiar and well-

understood sign and transforming it into an inward reality. He is using the sign of circumcision to represent the saving work of God on the human heart. And that is what is before us this morning.

v.28-29

Before we get there, however, let's look at the whole context. And we pick up from where we left off two weeks ago. Paul is criticizing, even condemning the hypocrisy of the Jews. He judges them for the hypocrisy of condemning others for doing the very same things they do themselves. Actually, his point is that those self-righteous hypocrites condemn themselves.

v.1

His rebuke continues,

v.17-20

They were boasting, boasting in God, boasting in their confidence of their relationship with God. After all, they had the approved outward form of religion that God prescribed. They were circumcised. But Paul's point is that, actually, they were lacking in the true knowledge of God. They had allowed their religion to become an empty, external shell. And so Paul says to them, in effect,

I. IT IS VAIN TO BOAST ABOUT AN EXTERNAL FORM OF RELIGION THAT IS LACKING TRUE KNOWLEDGE.

These verses are framed as a question, such that they point out the horrible errors of those Jews. They bragged about their relationship to God. They boasted, they took great confidence in their external identity. They were descendants of Abraham. But they failed to "teach themselves."

v.21a

The Jews boasted about an external sign of their religion, but

they lacked true knowledge, the true knowledge of God. Remember Jesus telling the Jews who were following him the same thing?

John 8:37 “I know that you are Abraham’s descendants, but you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. 38 I speak what I have seen with My Father, and you do what you have seen with your father.” 39 They answered and said to Him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would do the works of Abraham. 40 But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. 41 You do the deeds of your father.” Then they said to Him, “We were not born of fornication; we have one Father—God.”

They understood what Jesus was saying, and got pretty defensive. Jesus has a very good answer for them.

John 8:42 “Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me. 43 Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. 44 You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it. 45 But because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me. 46 Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me? 47 He who is of God hears God’s words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God.”

Thus here in Romans 2, Paul speaks the same rebuke to the unbelieving Jews in Rome. And his point is that,

A. You can’t teach others about God when you don’t know him yourself.

Paul remarks about the confidence which the Jews have in themselves, in verse 19, that they believe themselves to be a guide to the blind and the instructor of the foolish. They are confident that they have “the form of knowledge and truth in the law.” But they don’t know God themselves.

v.21 “You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself?”

The rebuke could be stated this way, “You who know all this stuff, you who teach others, why don’t you teach yourself?” It is a damning rebuke, to be sure.

The obvious point is that they didn’t know anything about God, despite the fact that they were actually teachers. They claimed to know God’s will. They claimed to know what was important in the law. They were convinced that they were a guide for others, others they considered blind. They were a light in the darkness. An instructor for the foolish and a teacher for the infants. They had the law, didn’t they? But they never learned it themselves! You can’t teach others about God when you don’t know him yourself!

There are a lot of that today as well. Religious teachers, preachers, who really don’t know the first thing about God, about Jesus, or about salvation. And they would stand under this same rebuke and condemnation.

Related to that, as Paul points out,

B. You can’t teach others about God’s law if you don’t know God’s law yourself.

Their hypocrisy was not simply that they didn’t know God, but that they willingly suppressed the knowledge of God’s revealed will, his law.

Now Paul is really getting himself in trouble with the Jews. He goes right to the heart of the law which the Jews claimed to uphold. He accuses them of stealing, of committing adultery, and of committing idolatry by robbing temples of the idols, taking for themselves the objects of idolatrous worship, which is expressly forbidden in the law.

Paul is calling those Jewish leaders thieves, adulterers, and idolators. He accuses them, with no subtlety whatsoever, of breaking the 8th, 7th, and 2nd commandments. There is no question whatsoever that this language would have been highly offensive to them, and that they would have responded in anger.

The point, however, is clear. Their religion was merely outward and external, and therefore empty. These words are a specific rebuke to the Jews in Rome, those who boasted in their self-satisfied hypocrisy that they were God's people. This rebuke applies very well to many people today, those who claim to be Christians but who don't know God's law and don't even know God.

It is vain for anyone today to boast about an external religion that is lacking in true knowledge of God and of his law, yet there are many people doing exactly that. There are many people today who claim the name of Christ, who do not know God at all. They believe that God will never express his wrath. They believe that God would never condemn anyone to hell.

And there are so many who simply do not know his law. I could go through each of the ten commandments, as our catechisms do, and point out what is required and forbidden in each of those commands. Too many people simply don't care!

They ignore that truth, and live in ignorance of it. And the hypocrisy being condemned here in Romans 2 is that of people who do not know God nor his law, but claim an outward form of religion or an external religious experience to be sufficient.

It is vain to boast about a merely external religion that is lacking true knowledge. And similarly,

II. IT IS VAIN TO BOAST ABOUT AN EXTERNAL RELIGION THAT IS LACKING GENUINE OBEDIENCE.

Paul is so confrontational with these Jews.

v.23

To self-righteous Jews, Paul might as well have plunged a knife right into the center of their hearts. The apostle looks squarely at them and says, "You dishonor God by breaking the law!" And that is the prophetic message that must be declared and proclaimed today as well.

I still remember the words of Mother Teresa at the national prayer breakfast way back in 1994. That small, frail, 83 year old woman spoke in the presence of the President and Vice President of the United States, and identified the great evil and lawlessness of abortion. The point was the same point Paul is making here in Romans 2, "You dishonor God by breaking the law!"

Paul's words get even stronger.

v.24

In other words,

A. God's name is blasphemed by those who claim to be his people but live in disobedience.

That's a quote from,

Isa. 52:5 “Now therefore, what have I here,” says the LORD, “That My people are taken away for nothing? Those who rule over them Make them wail,” says the LORD, “And My name is blasphemed continually every day.”

Please listen to the intensity of this declaration. Listen to the seriousness of this rebuke. God’s name is blasphemed by those who claim to be his people but who live in disobedience. There is no possibility of saying that any more forcefully.

What a huge rebuke to those who boast about an external religion, but who live in disobedience to God’s laws. Then and now, there are people who maintain an external form of religion. Some of them go to church nearly every week, but going into a church no more makes you a Christian than going into a garage makes you an automobile.

Those who live in disobedience deny the power of God to put sin to death. They claim to be religious or spiritual, but the openly, arrogantly, and willfully refuse to submit to the authority of God’s law. And we are warned to avoid them, as Paul writes to Timothy,

2 Tim. 3:1 “But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: 2 For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, 3 unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, 4 traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, 5 having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!”

Have nothing to do with them! For although they have a form of godliness, an external form, they deny its power. On the contrary, however,

B. God’s people are identified by their genuine obedience.

Now we get into the real significance of circumcision, and the real way in which God’s people are to be identified. Not by an outward sign. And actually, that never was the case, even in the OT. God’s people are identified by their genuine obedience. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant in the OT. It was commanded by God. Of course it had value. But only for those who faithfully and consistently sought to fulfill their obligation to love God by keeping his commandments.

v.25a

So even in the OT, circumcision was a valuable sign for those who kept the law. But for those who rejected God by rejecting his law, they became as those who were uncircumcised. In other words, by disobedience, a man who claimed to be a Jew was actually demonstrating that he was no different from a Gentile.

v.25b

So God’s people are identified by their genuine obedience, not merely by external signs. God’s people are identified by the active demonstration of their love for God. So we come back to the whole subject of circumcision. And what matters before God is not the external sign. The point is well made in,

v.26

In fact, Paul goes on to say,

v.27

Then we come to verse 28, where the sign of circumcision is used for the true, saving work of God in his people. However, the emphasis is upon the work of God on the human heart, not upon the mere outward act of cutting away the foreskin.

So what is true circumcision? What makes a person a Jew, in the fullest sense of the meaning of that word, a member of the covenant people of God? Today, we could ask the question this way, what makes a person a Christian? What is the true identification and definition of God's covenant people?

Well, to stay with Paul's line of thinking here, the answer is still circumcision.

III. CIRCUMCISION DEFINES GOD'S TRUE COVENANT PEOPLE.

But not simply the external form. Not simply the outward ritual. In fact, as a meaningful religious ritual, circumcision has ended. It is done away with in the New Covenant.

A. Circumcision, as the outward sign of God's covenant people, has ended.

And Paul says that quite plainly.
v.28

So who is a Jew? A true Jew? Who are the true people of God today? We no longer use circumcision as that identifying sign, because what matters is the work of God in our hearts. So Paul would write to the Galatians,

Gal.6:15 "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation."

The dramatic change of the NT is that the outward sign of circumcision no longer defines the covenant people of God. Circumcision no longer defined the covenant. Instead, as an outward sign, circumcision was done away with. And it is replaced by the sign of baptism.

Col. 2:9 "For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; 10 and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power. 11 In Him you were also circumcised with

the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, 12 buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead."

To make something very clear in English that is very clear in the Greek, let me simplify that sentence this way, "In him you were also circumcised...by being baptized." That's what Paul is saying. You were circumcised when you were baptized. Whatever circumcision meant, baptism now means. Whatever circumcision signified, baptism now signifies. And here's the key point in any debate about baptizing infants--whomever was to receive the sign of circumcision ought to receive the sign of baptism.

As an outward sign of the covenant, as a religious, ceremonial ritual, circumcision has ended. But, it has become a symbol. And as a symbol, circumcision still defines God's true covenant people. Verse 28 says a man is not a Jew if his only religious commitment is the external sign of circumcision. And verse 29 says that a man IS a Jew if the symbolic act of circumcision has taken place in his heart.

v.29

What a wonderful phrase. Circumcision of the heart. And what is circumcision of the heart? What is the meaning of those words. Simply this:

B. Circumcision is a symbol of the inward work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of God's true people.

Circumcision is a symbol of what God the Holy Spirit does in the hearts of his true people. And what does the Holy Spirit do? I can answer that question with an overused and often misunderstood phrase—he makes you born again. Circumcision

of the heart is the same thing as being born again. Born from above. Born of the spirit.

And how are we born again? Well, there is a significant theological word for it, the word regeneration. Regeneration means “making alive.” And how does God make us alive? I’ll read a description of it from Paul’s letter to Titus,

Titus 3:3 “For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. 4 But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, 5 not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

Circumcision is a symbol of the washing of regeneration, the washing of rebirth. It is a symbol of the renewal by the Holy Spirit whom God has poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior. And the clearest description of the symbolism of the inward work of the Holy Spirit is found in the OT. That amazes me, because I’d expect this description in the NT. But it’s in Ezekiel.

Ezek. 36:24 “For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. 25 Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. 28 Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you

shall be My people, and I will be your God. 29 I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses.”

That’s circumcision of the heart! “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean...I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh...You shall be my people, and I will be your God.”

That’s “circumcision of the heart.” And actually, that phrase is found frequently in the Bible. Paul didn’t make up the idea in this letter to the Romans. God had used the phrase often, proving that OT religion was also, in its deepest meaning, a religion of the heart. God frequently warned his people in the nation of Israel about the dangers of their merely external religion.

Deut. 10:16 “Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.”

Deut. 30:6 “And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.”

Jer. 4:3 “For thus says the LORD to the men of Judah and Jerusalem: “Break up your fallow ground,

And do not sow among thorns. 4 Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, And take away the foreskins of your hearts, You men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem.”

So circumcision still defines God’s true covenant people. Not the outward physical act of removing the foreskin from a man. But the inward act of God removing the horrible guilt and stain of sin from a person’s heart!

So who are the people of God? Who is a Jew?

v.28-29

Unless you know a little Hebrew, you miss the significance of that last phrase. The Hebrew word “Jew” means “praise.” The word “Jew” comes from the name of the tribe of Judah. And this pun, or a play on words, goes all the way back to the book of Genesis. Jew means “one who is praised.” And he who was only a Jew outwardly, often sought that praise from other men. But a true Jew, one who is a Jew inwardly, is praised not by men, but by God.

Truly, that is the goal of true religion, that your praise would come from God. That God would be pleased with you. And he will be pleased with you if your heart is circumcised, if he has given you a new heart, if he is caused you to be born again.

What matters before God is not the outward ritual. What matters is the condition of your heart. As Jesus put it so plainly, you must be born again.