

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this Bible study series two teachers will do Bible study from ROMANS 2:17-29.

In Romans 2:17-20, Paul addresses the Jews directly and enumerates the privileges and prerogatives on which Jews prided themselves. In Romans 2:21-24, he shows the Jews that, if they failed to carry out the obligations or teachings involved in all the privileges they enjoyed, those privileges only aggravated their condemnation. Notice the rising scorn and indignation of Paul against the hypocrisy of the Jews: “You teach others, but you do not teach yourself”. “You preach against wrongdoing, but you yourself steal, commit adultery and rob temples”. “You brag about the law, but dishonour God by breaking the law”. “You cause the Gentiles to blaspheme God!” In Romans 2:25-27, Paul evaluates circumcision. And in Romans 2:28-29, Paul teaches clearly the real nature and purpose of circumcision.

(S) **STEP 1. READ**

Let us read Romans 2:17-29 together. When you are two or more people, take turns to read one verse each until you have completed the reading. Due to shortage of time, please read Romans 2:17-29 for yourself.

(T) **STEP 2. DISCOVER**

Let us discover and discuss some important truths in Romans 2:17-29. “Which truth in this passage is important for you?” or “Which truth in this passage touches your mind or heart?” Think and write your answer in your notebook. After a few minutes take turns to share your discoveries with one another.

(S) An important truth for me is in Romans 2:17- 24 about Paul’s exposure of Jewish externalism with regard to their stand on their privileges and their position.

One. The privileges on which the Jews prided themselves (17-18). Since the Babylonian exile, the Israelites called themselves by the name “Jew”. The name means *a member of the state of Judah*. They were very proud to be Jews. They “found comfort and support” in the law, that is, they enjoyed hearing the law and speaking about the law, but they did not practise the law. They “gloried in God”, that is, they said that they worshipped God and that they had fellowship with God, but in reality that was merely an empty boast! They “knew God’s will”, that is, they possessed the Old Testament as the revelation of God’s will. They “approved of what is excellent”, that is, they continually argued about God’s will and tested what is in accordance with God’s will, rejecting what differs from it and approving what is in accord with it. They were “instructed in the law”, that is, they prided themselves that they had received instruction of the law from their parents and teachers by hearing the law (Neh 8:8).

Two. The position in which the Jews prided themselves (19-20). The Jews considered themselves to be greatly superior to all other nations in the world. They regarded the Gentile nations as spiritually blind and believed that only Jews were capable of instructing the Gentiles. This gave the Jews a feeling of superiority instead of responsibility. They said that the Gentile nations were in darkness, foolish and mere infants! The Jews equated “immaturity” with ignorance of the law and “maturity” with knowledge of the law. In itself “the guiding of the blind, being a light for those that are in the dark, being an instructor for the foolish, and being a teacher of infants” were virtues. Yet Paul said that these same virtues were vices with the Jews, because they boasted about things they themselves failed to do! The Jews boasted that they possessed in the book of the Old Testament (law) “the embodiment of knowledge and truth”. This means that they boasted that they possessed knowledge and truth in *a well-ordered form* or system (cf. Rom 6:17). Nevertheless, the Jews themselves possessed only *an outward form* of righteousness, but lacked the inner reality of that righteousness (cf. 2 Tim 3:5)!

(T) An important truth for me is in Romans 2:21-24 about the flagrant inconsistency between what the Jews professed and what they actually practised. The distorted conception of their advantages made the Jews self-complacent, and their self-complacency made them hypocritical. In order to shock the Jews out of their self-complacency, Paul exposes their hypocrisy. He gives three illustrations of teachings, which the Jews imparted to others, but failed to practice themselves: idolatry, adultery and theft. Idolatry and sexual immorality were precisely the sins of the Gentiles, which the Jews condemned the severest, but also committed themselves. Wherever the Jews were in power, they probably “robbed temples”. Nothing would have provoked the resentment of the Gentiles more than the desecration of their temples. Moreover, the Jews were also in a high degree guilty of dishonouring God, which is the essence of idolatry! They turned their own temple into “a den of robbers” (Mt 21:13), they withheld from God his due and they performed their religion not to glorify God, but to be honoured by men (cf. Mk 7:1-13). The Jews bragged about possessing the law, but dishonoured God by breaking the law. According to James 2:10 and 4:11-12, disobedience of the law is an insult against the majesty of the Lawgiver, God himself, and it causes the Gentiles to

blaspheme God. *The Gentiles expected a nation to be like their God.* And if a nation committed such crimes, as robbing temples, then their God must be of the same character and should be dishonoured accordingly.

(S) **STEP 3. QUESTION**

Let us try to understand all the truths in Romans 2:17-29 and ask our questions about the things we still do not understand. "Which question about anything in this passage would you like to ask to the group?" Think and write your question in your notebook. Then discuss the questions and try to find answers.

1st Question. (2:25-27) How can Paul say that physical circumcision still has value?

(T) **One. The physical circumcision of the Jews has value only if the requirements of the Old Testament covenant is kept** (25). The word "law" has several different meanings in the Letter to the Romans and the correct meaning is dependent on the context of the word. Here, the word "law" does not refer to the various Old Testament ceremonial laws, but rather to the Old Testament covenant. In this Old Testament covenant, God promised that he would be their God and they would be his people (Gen 17:7). This was a covenant of promise and grace. The requirements (26) of this covenant was faith in God's promise (cf. Gen 15:5-6) that was shown in obedience (cf. Gen 22:17-18). The sign and seal of this covenant was circumcision (Gen 17:9-14).

Paul maintained that circumcision only had value when the Jews fulfilled the requirement of faith and showed their faith by their obedience. If the Jews had no faith and no obedience, their claim on God's promises was mere presumption and even an empty mockery! Thus, in Romans 2:25-27, "keeping the law" is equivalent to "keeping the covenant". And "breaking the law" is equivalent to "breaking the covenant". When the requirements of God's covenant are neglected or violated, circumcision becomes uncircumcision and the outward sign of circumcision loses its significance (25).

Two. The uncircumcision of the Gentiles does not annul God's covenant if the requirements are kept (26). Here, "keeping the requirements of the law" does not refer to unbelieving Gentiles who obey their moral nature and conscience as in Romans 2:14. It rather refers to *Gentiles who have become Christians* as in Romans 1:16-17. The majority of the Gentile Christians are uncircumcised. But because they "fulfil the requirements of the covenant" by their faith and obedience to Jesus Christ, they become the real "people of God" and are even called the "Israel of God" (cf. Gal 6:12-16). Although these Gentiles are uncircumcised in their flesh, they are circumcised in their hearts and God regards this as the only real circumcision (28-29). On the one hand, the rite of circumcision of the flesh has no value apart from that which it signifies. On the other hand, when that which the rite of circumcision signifies is present, the absence of the sign in the flesh does not annul God's covenant of grace!

Three. The physically uncircumcised will condemn the physically circumcised (27). The uncircumcised Gentile Christians, who fulfil the requirements of God's covenant, will condemn the circumcised Jews, who possess God's written revelation, but nevertheless break the requirements of God's covenant. Likewise, the believing Gentiles of Nineveh will stand up in the final judgement day and condemn the unbelieving Jews in the time of Jesus (Mt 12:41-42). The faith of the uncircumcised Gentiles will condemn the unbelief of the circumcised Jews!

2nd Question. (2:25-29) What was the real nature and purpose of physical circumcision?

(S) During the time of Abraham, physical circumcision was a *sign of justification by faith* (Rom 4:11). But during the time of Moses, physical circumcision became a *sign of justification by works of the law* (Gal 5:1-4).

One. Physical circumcision as a sign of justification by faith. God made a covenant of promises and grace with Abraham. In this covenant, he graciously promised Abraham three things: First. Abraham would become the father of many nations. His descendants would be as numerous as the stars and as the sand on the seashore. And the Lord would be the God of his descendants. Second. God would give the land of Canaan to Abraham's descendants. These first two promises were already fulfilled by the time Joshua conquered the land of Canaan (Josh 21:43-45; 23:14-16). Third. God would bless all the nations of the earth through one of Abraham's descendants (Gen 12:1-3,7; 15:1-6,18-21; 17:1-14; 22:17-18). Abraham believed God and God credited it to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6). God gave Abraham physical circumcision as the sign and seal of this covenant of God's promises and God's grace. Physical circumcision was therefore a *sign and seal that God justified people through faith* (Rom 4:11)! The people who were physically circumcised were obligated to keep this covenant of God's promises and God's grace. They were obligated to continue to live as people justified by faith, that is, as God's people in this world.

However, the outward, physical circumcision also had an inward, spiritual meaning. The foreskin that was cut away symbolised uncleanness and physical circumcision of the body pointed to the spiritual circumcision of the heart. The cutting away of the uncleanness of the body (flesh) symbolised the cutting away of the uncleanness of the heart (Dt 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4). Thus, physical circumcision symbolised *rebirth by the Holy Spirit*. A person who was justified by

faith was at the same time spiritually circumcised in heart by the Holy Spirit. His physical circumcision was an outward visible sign and seal of God that he was truly born-again, justified and belonged to God's people. Only in this spiritual sense does circumcision still have value today (Rom 2:25). Nevertheless, while spiritual circumcision of the heart is always the work of the Holy Spirit, physical circumcision of the body always remains the work of people.

Two. Physical circumcision as a sign of justification by works of the law. More than 400 years *after* Abraham, physical circumcision became *detached* from the covenant of grace and became *attached* to the ceremonial law of Moses (Lev 12:3; Jn 7:22). The Jews no longer regarded physical circumcision of the body (flesh) as the sign and seal of being spiritually circumcised in heart and of being justified by faith, but regarded it as *God's pledge that God would give eternal life to people who obeyed the law* in the sense of the moral law, the ceremonial law and the civil law of the state of Israel. The Jews wrongfully interpreted Leviticus 18:5 in this way. For the Jews in the time of Moses, physical circumcision became a sign and seal that God justified people through the works of the law, even though God never gave that meaning to physical circumcision. Later Paul taught that if the Jews let themselves be physically circumcised, because they believed that they would be justified by keeping the law, then the Jews were obligated to keep the whole law of works (Gal 5:1-4)! Paul also taught that no one keeps the whole law of God without breaking one law in his life. Therefore God would not justify any person on the basis of keeping the law.

It is obvious that the Jews in the New Testament time regarded physical circumcision as a means that in some way secured their justification or salvation. They taught, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). Other Jewish rabbis taught that "no circumcised man will see hell". And they alleged that "God swore to Abraham, that no one, who was circumcised, should be sent to hell". They told everyone that "Abraham sits before the gate of hell and does not allow that any circumcised Israelite should enter there." Thus, physical circumcision in fact became the physical outward sign of Jewish nationalism!

This teaching of the Jewish rabbis is certainly not based on the facts of the Bible.

3rd Question. (2:28-29). What is a real Jew and what is genuine circumcision in God's eyes?

(T) One. A real Jew. The word 'Jew' is derived from the tribe of Judah and means 'praise' (Gen 29:35; 49:8). A real Jew desires to receive his praise from God, while a fake Jew desires to receive his praise from people. Jesus condemned the Jews, because they relied on outward appearance and were always seeking praise from one another (Jn 5:44). Paul regards a mere outward physical Jew as a fake Jew. Natural descent from Abraham does not make a Jew a real Jew in God's eyes.

A genuine 'Jew', that is, a genuine believer that receives praise from God, is not characterised by what he is outwardly and physically, but what he is inwardly and spiritually! The only genuine 'Jew' is a person whose heart has been circumcised by the Holy Spirit. Thus, the only genuine 'Jew' is a Christian! Only such a person receives praise from God! Fake Jews receive their praise from other people, but genuine 'Jews' receive their praise from God.

Two. Genuine circumcision. Physical circumcision in the time of the New Testament was no longer a sign of the covenant of grace, but had become a custom based on the Old Testament ceremonial law. The outward physical sign of circumcision has no value whatsoever unless it remains a sign for previously circumcised people that they have been spiritually circumcised in their hearts.

The New Testament clearly teaches that physical circumcision has been abrogated (cf. Eph 2:15; Col 2:14). "In Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Gal 5:6). "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything anymore; what counts is being a new creation" through justification by faith and rebirth by the Holy Spirit. All people who follow this rule are really *the people of God* and are called *the Israel of God* (Gal 6:15-16; cf. 2 Cor 6:16).

(S) **STEP 4. APPLY**

Let us brainstorm with one another and record a list of *possible applications* from Romans 2:17-29.

- (T) From Romans 2:17. Never brag about your relationship to God.
- (S) From Romans 2:21. When you teach others, make very sure that you first teach yourself!
- (T) From Romans 2:22. Never preach something that you do not practise (cf. Mt 23:3)!
- (S) From Romans 2:24. Remember that non-Christians judge your God by your conduct!
- (T) From Romans 2:29. Make sure that you are spiritually circumcised in your heart by the Holy Spirit.

(S) From Romans 2:29. Don't look for the praise of people, but seek God's recommendation (2 Cor 10:18).

(T) Afterwards consider which possible application God wants you to turn into a *personal application*.

(S) My personal application is the following. I want to proclaim the whole gospel message. This means that I must proclaim salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, as well as judgement for those who remain unbelievers. I must include the proclamation of the final judgement day in the gospel message.

(T) My personal application is the following. I want to teach that every outward sign like baptism or the Lord's Supper has no meaning at all if the inward reality of which it is a sign is absent. I will proclaim to all people that they need to be justified by faith and that unless God spiritually circumcises their hearts, they will remain lost.

(S) **STEP 5. PRAY**

Let us take turns to pray about one truth that God has taught us in Romans 2:17-29.

Dear Father in heaven, make me a faithful proclaimer of the complete gospel message. Help me to explain to people the way of salvation, but also to warn them that in the Final Judgement Day, God will judge everyone according to his works.

(T) Dear Father in heaven, make me a faithful proclaimer of the real meaning of the Christian sacraments. Help me to explain that without circumcision of the heart and justification by faith, all outward sacraments, like baptism, have ultimately no significance. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

(S) **ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK**

First. Join a house fellowship that does Bible study. Use "the five steps" Bible study method to prepare Romans 3:1-20.

Second. See the workbooks "Go and preach God's Kingdom" and Internet on www.dota.net

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to "Discipleship training on the air".