

Circumcision of the Heart

Romans 2:11-29
September 24, 2017

We ended our passage last Sunday, the beginning of Romans, chapter 2, with verse 11, “*For God shows no partiality*” or other versions read, “*For God does not show favoritism,*” and we talked about how left to our own powers, none of us sinful human beings are able to make ourselves right before God, neither Jew nor Gentile. Jews are those who had or have the law and Gentiles are those who did not. Verse 11 is a good lead in to our Scripture this morning:

¹¹ *For God shows no partiality.*

¹² *For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.* ¹³ *For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.* ¹⁴ *For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law.* ¹⁵ *They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them* ¹⁶ *on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.*

¹⁷ *But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God* ¹⁸ *and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law;* ¹⁹ *and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness,* ²⁰ *an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—* ²¹ *you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal?* ²² *You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?* ²³ *You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.* ²⁴ *For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”*

²⁵ *For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.* ²⁶ *So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?* ²⁷ *Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law.* ²⁸ *For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.* ²⁹ *But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.* Romans 2:11-29 (ESV)

¹² *For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, (that’s the Gentiles) and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law* ¹³ *For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified (that’s the Jews).*

Because God does not show partiality or favoritism, He takes into account the spiritual light that He has given to different people throughout the ages. In Paul’s day it was two distinct groups of people: the Israelites who had the both the privilege and the responsibility of having received the Law, given through Moses; and those who were without the Law, the Gentiles. Both groups of people had and have the opportunity for salvation and there are people from both groups who will perish because they have not and do not take advantage of that opportunity. The lost Gentile will just as surely perish as the lost Jew will perish.

It was the Jews to whom God had entrusted much. He gave them the Law – His desire for how people are to live. But with that gift came responsibility. More was expected of them. They were to be more than just hearers or listeners of God’s Law, they were to be doers of God’s law.

This part of our passage this morning speaks to even more people today. Those of us who have been blessed by God to have received both the Old Testament Law and the New Testament Gospel of the fulfillment of that Law in Jesus Christ will be even more accountable to God than the Jewish people were when Paul wrote this letter.

And likewise, we are not just to be hearers or listeners of the Word of God, we are to be doers. Paul’s words are echoed further along in the New Testament by the disciple James: *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says* (James 1:22).

I recently heard about this being compared to someone who takes a class in college for credit verses one who just audits a class. One who takes the class for credit not only comes to the class to listen to what the teacher has to say, but he or she has the responsibility of being accountable to what he or she hears and is going to be tested on it. When someone simply audits a class all one needs to do is attend and listen. He or she takes no tests and receives no grade. There is no accountability for what he or she hears.

When it comes to God’s Law and the Word of God, auditing is not an option. The more a person hears the Word of God, the more he or she is responsible for believing and obeying it. It is not enough just to come to church on Sunday and listen to God’s Word, you must live it out in your life Monday through Saturday.

The “doers of the Law” today are those who come to God in repentance and faith, realizing that His Law is impossible for them to keep apart from Him. The “doers of the Law” today are those who come to Jesus Christ in faith, because the purpose of the Law, is, and always has been, to lead people to Him!

Paul begins our passage this morning by 1st addressing the Jewish Christians. Then in v. 14-16 Paul returns to addresses the Gentiles who were without the Law.

¹⁴ For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵ They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them ¹⁶ on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

Gentiles, representing those who do not have the Law, will not be exempt from God’s judgment. Paul gives several reason why?

All those throughout history, even up to this very day, who do not have the Law, are without excuse because God has revealed enough of himself through nature and creation that people should know that God exists and there is an ordered way that people are supposed to live.

Since all human beings are created in the image of God, there is something inside of each of us that at least recognizes that there is a God and there is a way that God wants us to live. Many people throughout history who never had a copy of the written Law or the Law of God proclaimed to them verbally, have done what much of the law required of them. The Law was written on their hearts and their consciences bore witness to it. Almost every culture that has ever existed throughout human history has determined that there are certain things which are right and certain things which are wrong and many of those things have been consistent across the cultures. So Paul says, “even those who have never had the Law are not exempt from the judgment of God.”

In verse 16 he writes, *on that day* (there he means the final judgment day) *according to my gospel* (and there he doesn't mean his own gospel, He means the Gospel of God which was passed on to him), *God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus*. Which is exactly why last week I said it is beyond our ability to adequately judge other human beings. Only God knows our hearts and the intentions of our heart.

King David counseled his son, Solomon, “*acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the LORD searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts*” (1 Chronicles 28:9). David should know, he's the only one in the Bible that God refers to as “a man after his own heart.”

And yet David committed some terrible sins while he served as God's anointed king. At least a couple of those sins were capital offenses for which God could have justly demanded David's life. But he didn't. Why not?

Because God knew David's heart. He knew that the basic motivation and direction of David's life was not in those couple of very selfish and unrighteous acts. David was also quick to acknowledge and confess his sins before God, throwing himself on God's mercy and grace. Not only do we have Psalm 51 which David wrote after his indiscretion with Bathsheba, which Alex shared a couple of weeks ago, we have these of his from Psalm 139:23-24, from our Call to Worship this morning, “Search me, O God, and know my heart... See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me to the way everlasting.”

In contrast to King David who committed some very serious sins, even at least a couple which have been viewed by God at points throughout history as punishable by death, there have also been people who as unbelievers lived pretty good lives, of high moral character. But that is not the kind of goodness that satisfies God, because nothing is truly good that is done for any motive other than His glory and done in any power other than His. Everything that is done in our human flesh can only serve the flesh and by its nature is tainted with imperfection and self-interest, and much of the time we don't even know it.

Whether born a Jew or born a Gentile, a redeemed life in Christ will produce holy living. And right living has to come from the right motivation. The two of those combined is evidence of genuine salvation in Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit in one's life.

Paul then returns to addressing the early Jewish Christians. Yes, the Jews had the Law, they had the Old Covenant, and they had the sign of the Old Covenant, circumcision. But circumcision is just a sign, in and of itself it means nothing. It's only of value if you live out your life in a manner in which the sign is supposed to represent – an intimate relationship with Yahweh – God, that which was also represented by trying to live a life in obedience to what He commanded.

²⁵ For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. ²⁶ So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? ²⁷ Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. ²⁸ For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. ²⁹ But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God. Romans 2:25-29 (ESV)

Circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, and not by the letter (the letter of the Law). In the day that Paul wrote this letter the Jews had false security in the Law and the external act of circumcision. The sad fact is many Jews still do today.

It's also a sad fact that many Christians today do as well. If Paul were writing this part of his letter to us Christians today it might read something like this:

“For baptism is indeed of value if you follow in the Way of Jesus, but if you do not follow in the Way of Jesus, your baptism becomes un-baptism. If a man or a woman who has never been baptized but follows in the Way of Jesus, will not his or her un-baptism become baptism? He or she who has never been baptized but is following the Way of Jesus condemns those who have been baptized but are not following the Way of Jesus. For no one is a Christian who is merely one outwardly, whether by claiming to be a Christian verbally, or wearing Christian memorabilia such as a cross or a tattoo identifying him or herself as a Christian, or even by being baptized in water (whether sprinkled, poured or immersed). But a Christian is one inwardly and baptism is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the Law. His or her praise is not from man but from God.”

³¹ “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD.

³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”
Jeremiah 31:31-34 (ESV)

Whether it was in the Old Testament/the Old Covenant times or the New Testament/the New Covenant times, a person's inner nature must be in harmony with the outward symbols of the covenant. If this is not true, there is no covenant relationship. This is not a teaching that

originated with the Apostle Paul, or even just in the New Testament. The first person to teach this was Moses: *The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.* Deut. 30:6 (NIV)

Try as we might, we cannot circumcise or baptize our own hearts. In the Old Testament times it was the Lord God who did it. Paul says in New Testament times it is the work of the Spirit, that would be the Holy Spirit. Those who are circumcised in the heart by the Holy Spirit, which comes today only through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, are accepted by God. Only He alone can verify spiritual circumcision.

Why do we circumcise baby boys today as infants? Because they don't know any better☺. Circumcision is a painful experience. If us men had to wait until we were adults to do it most of us would probably not do it. More often than not, "circumcision of the heart" by God is a painful experience. Many of us would probably not choose it on our own. As believers in Jesus Christ, "Circumcision of our hearts" by God is a lifetime experience. He's preparing us for the life to come.