

Prayer

Lord God, our Father, we take hold of the treasury of life that You have given us with joy. For You have graciously saved us from becoming trapped by sin and evil. Alert us now to our frequent vulnerabilities, for the enemy will often come on us unawares. Give us the courage to turn away from all evil, and accept the gifts You offer us of faith, hope and love. We pray this in the name of Jesus: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

As an exercise, write a text giving thanks to the Lord for the day. Let this remind you of what has been truly important, and praise Him for His blessings

On-going prayers

- **Confess your sins to God.** *It can be hard to confess sins, so today, ask the Lord to help you search your heart*
- *Give thanks to God for His mercy shown through Jesus*
- *Pray about the subject of global warming; seek God's wisdom*

Meditation

Can you hear the glory of the Lord?
Can you hear His presence all around you?

He is in the roar of a great and mighty river
and the gentle bubbling of a mountain stream;

He is in the majestic sound of a symphony orchestra
and the wonderful resonance of a human voice;

He is in whispered words of loving tenderness
and the secrets spoken between two lovers;

He is in generous and timely words of support
and the quiet respect of a companion or friend;

He is in the delightful burbling of a tiny baby
and the loving response of a mother or a father;

He is in the peace of a quiet and open field
And the hint of a sound like a butterfly's flight ...

Listen, He is here ...

Bible passage – Romans 2:17-29

¹⁷ Now if you call yourself a Jew, put your trust in the Law, take pride in God, ¹⁸ know His will and discern what is best because you have been taught the Law, ¹⁹ and if you are sure you are a guide to the blind, a light to those in darkness, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law all necessary knowledge and truth, ²¹ why do you teach others and not teach yourself?

You who preach 'do not steal'; do you steal? ²² You who forbid adultery; do you commit adultery? You who detest idols; do you commit sacrilege against the temple? ²³ You boast in the law; do you bring shame on God by breaking the law? ²⁴ For, as it is written, 'God's name is blasphemed by the Gentiles because of you!'

²⁵ Circumcision does indeed have value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, you become like one who is uncircumcised. ²⁶ So then, if those who are uncircumcised do what is

right by the Law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? ²⁷ Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you who have the Scriptures and circumcision, but break the law. ²⁸ For being a Jew is not a matter of outward appearance, and neither is true circumcision something external and physical. ²⁹ Rather, someone who is a real Jew is so inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, it is spiritual and not the letter of the Law. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.

Bible Study

Review

With these words, Paul seems to explode with indignation against His own people, the Jews. In Romans, his case against them is that they had become an obstruction to God's work, and despite His many attempts to work with them, they had isolated themselves from the world when God had a work for them to do. We have seen something of Paul's feelings about this in the first sixteen verses of Romans 2, but in this passage, his frustration boils over. He turns away from making general points about God's judgement and attacks the Jewish people, focussing on the most significant features of God's covenant with Israel, the law and the commandments (2:17-24), and circumcision (2:25-29).

This is a long passage, but it is better to deal with Paul's attack on the Jewish people as one text, and not split it up. Within each part there are hints of further interest, and we will pick up some of these in the later study, 'going deeper', but the main theme is clear, Paul says that the covenant of God with the Jews has come to nothing. We must therefore look elsewhere to discover how God intends to deal with evil in the world through a chosen people, and there are some clues about this at the end of our passage (1:28,29). Paul says that God identifies His people not by looking at physical properties, but at the heart. This is not a complete answer to the problems of sin he has previously identified so rigorously, but it is a start.

Paul writes all this as if addressing Jews personally, and it is only in verse 25 that his tone changes and he begins to speak more generally. Firstly, he lists things of which any Jew would have been proud, such as having a relationship with God and possessing the Law (2:17), but he then describes Jews as those who teach the law (2:18-20). This part may well be rather biographical, for not every Jew was '*an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children ...*' (2:19). This may well have reflected Paul's own upbringing as a strict Pharisee, in which he had to learn all the details of the law and apply them in every area of life. So he may be speaking from personal experience and perhaps chiding for his past when he says, '*why do you teach others and not teach yourself?*' (2:21).

In a cutting paragraph, Paul shows the futility of mere legal observance. He turns to the details of God's law, something he knew very well, and challenges Jews about whether they can indeed say that they keep the Ten Commandments (2:21,22) perfectly. He says this knowing that most honest people know full well that they are not perfect. His conclusion is stark; if God's people are not able to keep His law, then how can they represent God in the world? False representation of God is blasphemy (2:24)!

Now at this point, any Jew would complain to Paul that his point was exaggerated, for Jews were God's people through circumcision (2:25f.). Paul retorts that one who breaks the Law denies their circumcision, and then turns the argument on its head by suggesting (as he did in yesterday's passage) that uncircumcised people might be capable of doing right, according to the Law, quite naturally (2:26)! If Gentiles did this, then they should be regarded as circumcised! It is after this that Paul says God is no longer interested in identifying His people by physical signs; He now looks at the heart for '*one who is a real Jew ... inwardly*' (2:29).

Paul had to speak in this way because in the early church, people were still confused about the difference between Jews and Christians. For some, the one faith had naturally come from the other, and they slipped between the two religious systems without noticing. So Paul made sure that the Christian church was completely separated from Judaism. Yes, he was a Jew himself, but he had been converted, and Jesus had revealed to him the Gospel for the Gentiles. Consequently the old ways of Judaism were no longer God's ways, and Paul made sure that everyone knew this.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these important issues. All of them seem distant from the needs of the church now, but by looking at them we can learn much about how to keep the faith pure:

- The need to deal with the teaching of Judaism within the early church

- The responsibilities of being a Jew and testifying to God in the world
- The truth about circumcision, and why it is for Jews and not Christians

Going Deeper

The need to deal with the teaching of Judaism within the early church

In Paul's day, many teachers circulated around the early church who taught that it was necessary for Christians to be fully compliant with the Laws of the Old Testament and the Covenant if they wanted to be accepted by God. In addition, they insisted that converts be circumcised, because in the Old Testament, the Covenant relationship of God with His people was strongly related to circumcision (see Genesis 17). On top of this, they added to the written law the burden of the traditional rabbinic interpretations of the law, written down in other documents such as the 'Mishnah' and the 'Talmuds' (written in the third century BC and later).

This was a strong message with an apparently solid Biblical background, and it is no wonder that many early Christians accepted it. Paul had to use all his skills to persuade nearly every church to which he wrote that all this was a false argument (see for example Galatians 3:1f. and Philippians 3:2f.), and he insisted that becoming a Christian did not require circumcision. We should not underestimate the power of God by crediting Paul alone with winning this argument; circumcision was not God's plan for the church and God would surely have dealt with it one way or another, but the fact remains that Paul was the main opponent of it, and his arguments won the day (see Acts 15). We should take note of the way Paul did this, because he had to dismantle a popular view of faith and scripture held by a significant number of people in the church, because it was wrong. Many sharp disputes occur today because of differing interpretations of Scripture, but we should learn from how Paul deals here with circumcision. Looking at Romans as a whole and also his other writings about the subject, Paul was careful and patient to prove his case from scripture, and we do well to follow his example.

The responsibilities of being a Jew and testifying to God in the world

Paul's attack on the Jewish preachers of his day was a thinly veiled attack on Judaism as a whole. It is likely that Paul was not really interested in whether individual Jews did or did not keep the Law. His point was that the Jewish people as a whole presented themselves to the world as those who possessed within their culture the true revelation of God. This meant that if any of them fell short of the required high moral stance, their standing in the eyes of other people was severely reduced. The Jews claimed to be 'leaders of the blind' (2:19), but Paul's despair at his own people is similar to that of Jesus, who called them 'blind guides'! (Matt 15:14, 23:16).

We can easily see why, as part of this argument, Paul would quote the moral laws about stealing and adultery (2:21,22), for they were common sins which served the purpose of illustrating that Jews sinned as much as Gentiles. However, the third item in his sequence of accusations is more interesting; 'You who detest idols; do you commit sacrilege against the temple?' What does this mean? It seems strange that Paul should accuse the Jews of unholy or blasphemous activity in the temple, however there is one possible explanation. In one of the earlier studies, we observed that the church at Rome probably had few Jews at the time Paul wrote, because Jews had been expelled from Rome. This happened on a number of occasions in the first century, and the Jewish historian Josephus (Antiquities, 18:81-84) records an occasion when a noble Roman lady was persuaded to make a large contribution of funds to the temple in Jerusalem which was promptly embezzled, and as a result, the Emperor threw the Jews out of Rome. This was the kind of incident that brought the whole Jewish nation into disrepute in full public view within the Empire, and probably lay behind Paul's accusation.

To indicate God's response to the sins of His own people, Paul quotes loosely from Isaiah 52:5 when saying 'God's name is blasphemed by the Gentiles because of you.' (2:24). It was a constant theme of the Old Testament that God's people brought the Lord dishonour in the eyes of other nations and people, which was contrary to the Covenant between God and Abraham (Gen 12:2,3). All the Major Prophets made this point, as in this example from Ezekiel:

But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name ... Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD, says the Lord GOD, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. (Ezekiel 36:20-23)

Paul demonstrated by good argument and from Scripture that the Jews were as much in need of salvation from sin as the Gentiles. Indeed, their need may perhaps be said to be greater, for they had failed the greater task of bearing God's Law and demonstrating God's light.

The truth about circumcision, and why it is for Jews and not Christians

Despite the lack of many references to circumcision in the Old Testament, the connection between this practise and the Covenant with God was very strong, because of the great importance of Genesis 17 to Jewish self identity. However, many nations around Israel also practiced circumcision, and it was by no means a unique physical 'sign' back in the time of Abraham. This is probably why there are many references in the Old Testament to the 'real' circumcision as being of the heart (Deut 10:16, 30:6, Jer 4:6, Ez 44:7, Jer 31:31, Ez 11:19, 36:26). The Egyptians certainly practiced circumcision, which is why Moses emphasised its spiritual nature in Deuteronomy. It is also helpful to remember that when the Bible talks about the 'heart' it does not mean 'emotions'. Rather, the 'heart', in Hebrew, was the seat of someone's inner being, and largely connected to what we might call the 'will' which is the inner source of decision making. So when the Scriptures talk about being 'circumcised of the heart' (2:29) it means being totally committed to God and doing His will (and keeping His Law!).

However, in Paul's day, circumcision had become far more than this. Throughout the Roman Empire there were people who genuinely admired the beliefs and life of the Jewish people, and the leaders of the synagogues in various towns of the Roman Empire insisted that when male non-Jews expressed a formal interest in being a part of the Jewish community, then they should be circumcised. In the first century, there were many secular authors who, when writing about the Jews, called them 'The Circumcised', so close was the connection between the rite and the Jew's self identity. Circumcision had become a badge of identity, and this is what Paul objected to so strongly. God's people were supposed to take their identity from God, not from a physical mark in the flesh of men.

So when Paul argued that circumcision was not a 'matter of outward appearance' (2:28) he did not say anything that would have been unfamiliar to someone who knew Scriptures; rather, he argued against the prevailing attitudes of his day which had made an idol out of God's gracious gift of circumcision. Yes, the people who supported circumcision could quote Genesis 17 as their Scriptural source, but Paul had an abundance of other Scriptures which all supported his interpretation (2:26-29), and these texts interpreted the original instruction given to Abraham in Genesis. What Paul's opponents did was to make a god not just out of circumcision, but out of the Scriptural text upon which this was based. Paul used the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture, concluding 'real circumcision is a matter of the heart, it is spiritual ...' (2:29).

In an interesting twist to the end of this passage, Paul said about those who were circumcised of the heart, that 'such a person receives praise not from others but from God'. What is hidden from our eyes and gives meaning to this comment is the fact that the Hebrew word for 'praise' is 'yadah', and this is the meaning of the name 'Judah', from which the generic name 'Jew' comes (when Judah was born, his mother Leah said 'this time I will praise the Lord' – Gen 29:35). This last sentence is therefore a slightly coded way for Paul to say 'it is God who sees the real Jew!'

Application

Understandably, all these arguments about Judaism and circumcision can appear to be boring for Christians today, however important they were for the people to whom Paul was attempting to explain the Gospel. We must accept however, that Paul's successful defence of the freedom of the Christian Church was very important, for its mission amongst the wider Roman Empire and beyond needed to be free of domination by Judaism. Paul's defence was based upon good reasoning and the proper use of Scripture to interpret Scripture. It was also based upon a formal decision of the Church, which met in Jerusalem under Peter (Acts 15) in full council, to agree with Paul that circumcision should not be required of the Gentiles. These three principles of good reason, the use of Scripture and the blessing of the Church (God's people), remain fundamentally good principles upon which to base decisions about matters of faith and doctrine.

At the end of chapter 2 of Romans, we have arrived at the point where Paul has successfully argued the equality of all people before God. Everyone is equally in need of His gracious favour and salvation. To this day, this is the starting point for the proclamation of the Gospel. Today, we have the same task of persuading people of their need of God's grace, even though it must be in different ways.

Our problem today is that most people think they are superior and do not need either God or religion. Indeed, the secular argument against Christianity today is that people have 'grown up' and do not need the 'prop' of religion. In the face of problems and even evil, they suggest that we can fend for ourselves. Frankly, this is a patronizing attitude and it beggars belief. In matters of morality we cannot say that humanity has grown over the centuries, and the growth of civilisation has not been matched by growth in maturity or goodness. Indeed, the extent of bribery and corruption in the secular world today is extraordinary; it feeds daily newspapers and magazines across the world and demonstrates the point perfectly. All people are in need of help to deal with sin, no less now than at any time in the history of the world. This remains true, even though circumcision has little to do with all this today.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How important is it for any group of people to have an 'outward sign' that demonstrates their allegiance? What 'outward signs' represent Christians?
2. Discuss the place of Jews in the life of the Church today. Do they have anything unique to offer God's people the church?
3. What controversial Christian beliefs today that are based on only one or two passages of Scripture? Can Scripture always help us to interpret Scripture?

Personal comments by author

I suggest that today would be a good time to consider your own feelings about the Jewish people and the nation of Israel. Paul has spoken strongly against the inappropriate preaching of Jewish preachers in his own day who attempted to enforce Judaism on Christianity, and this does not happen today. However, should we believe that the Israelite people and nation have a special place in God's plans today? I would not always recommend reading ahead in a book of the Bible that is already being studied, but in this instance, I suggest reading Romans 9-11 now. It will help you gain a more balanced view of Paul's attitude towards the Jews.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *In what ways do you demonstrate to people that you are a Christian? Do you have a sticker in your car, or do you wear some kind of badge? Do you appreciate seeing others who have such labels, and what do you feel about making it known to everyone that you are a Christian? Pray about whether you need to be more open about your faith.*
- *Over a period of time, pray for God's people, the Jews, based on what you have learned about them from scripture. If you have a Jewish friend, this may help you pray more intelligibly.*

Final Prayer

Glorious Lord, conquer our fears, have victory over our inhibitions, dispel our doubts and calm our failing nerves. Then, when we have found our peace in You, may we praise You for who You are with all our being, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN
