



## Privileged Jews Need the Gospel Romans 2:17 - 3:8

### Introduction

In Romans 1:16-17, Paul proclaimed that the gospel is *the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith.* He demonstrated the natural man's need of the gospel in verses 18-32. He went on to show the religious person's need for the gospel in Romans 2:1-16. Now he points out that the Jews, in spite of their privileged position in having the law and circumcision, also need the gospel. The law has pronounced them guilty because their knowledge has not led to obedience. Their circumcision was intended to be an outward sign of an inward reality. But they had not demonstrated an inward change. Paul warned that God's righteous judgment is coming: *to the Jew first and also to the Greek* (Romans 2:9 and 10). The Jews needed to see the true significance of the law and circumcision. Knowledge of the law and the outward cutting away of the flesh are not effectual for salvation!

### Outline of Romans 2:17-3:8

- I. The True Significance of the Law -  
Romans 2:17-24
- II. The True Significance of Circumcision -  
Romans 2:25-29
- III. The True Advantage of the Jew -  
Romans 3:1-8

#### I. The True Significance of the Law - Romans 2:17-24

Paul addresses this portion of his letter to *the Jew* (verse 17). The word "Jew" was derived from the name Judah who was one of the twelve sons of Jacob, and from whom came the leading tribe of Israel (Genesis 49:8). Judah (and Jew) means "praise." On the day Judah was born, his mother, Leah, said, *"Now I will praise the Lord."* Therefore she called his name Judah (Genesis 29:35). Jacob's last words to Judah were *Judah, you are he whom his brothers shall praise* (Genesis 49:8). The term "Jew" was first applied to the people of the tribe of Judah, but as the tribe and territory of Judah became the largest of the twelve tribes, all the Hebrew people came to be called Jews.

##### A. The privileges of the Jew - Romans 2:17

Paul points out two distinct privileges of the Jew in which they took pride: the law and God.

##### 1. The Jews rest on the law - 2:17

The law was the Jews' *wisdom and understanding* (Deuteronomy 4:5-6). It was their *knowledge and truth* (Romans 2:20). They relied upon the law as their special privileged possession and did not see the law as their accuser (John 5:45).

##### 2. The Jews boast in God - 2:17

They were justly proud of their God. He was their hope (Psalm 146:5) and they did not see His judgment as ever falling on them. Read Psalm 16.

##### B. The confidence of the Jew - Romans 2:18-20

"For the Jews, the law was both the center of education and the heart of worship" (*The Epistle to the Romans*, Leon Morris). The synagogue was the place of worship, but also a school where the Jews were given formal instruction in the law. The law contained the *form* (or *embodiment* NASB) *of knowledge and truth* (2:20). It was the outward expression of the absolute knowledge and truth of God! It taught what God required and commanded. Therefore, the Jews knew His will and discerned right from wrong (approve the things that are excellent). This gave them a confidence (actually an overconfidence, even a false confidence) which caused them to exalt themselves above the Gentiles. The word confidence in verse 19 literally means "convinced." The Jews were convinced of their superiority because they were the proud possessors of the law of God!

##### 1. They were guides to the blind - 2:19

The Jews felt that all other people (Gentiles) were spiritually blind and that they were the ones with sight. It is ironic that Jesus called the Jews "blind guides" on several occasions. Referring to the Pharisees, He said, *they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit* (Matthew 15:14). See also Matthew 23:15-16 and 23-24.

##### 2. They were a light to those who are in darkness - 2:19

Their God is the *Father of lights* (James 1:17) and they were enlightened by their law (Psalm 19:8). They looked upon themselves as *a light to the nations* (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6). However, they should have been humble instead of proud because the light they had was only by the grace of God.

3. They were the *instructor of the foolish* - 2:20

The Greek word translated *instructor* refers to one who corrects and disciplines. The *foolish* are those who are unintelligent regarding spiritual things. The New English Bible uses the word *stupid*.

4. They were teachers of *babes* - 2:20

*Babes* denotes those who have only natural knowledge and are immature concerning spiritual things. The Jews knew the law and exalted themselves as teachers.

### C. Guilt of the Jew - Romans 2:21-24

In this passage, the hypocrisy of the Jews is unveiled. They had the law, which was a special treasure as a revelation from God. But the Jews did not value and handle the law properly. They did not live up to what they had been taught. "Instead of being humble..., the Jew gloried in his position of spiritual privilege and displayed a totally unwarranted spiritual pride... In his conduct he was denying the teaching of the law on which he prided himself and causing the name of the great God he worshipped to be blasphemed by the heathen" (The Epistle to the Romans, Leon Morris).

1. *You...who teach another, do you not teach yourself?* - 2:21

The Jews saw themselves as teachers of the pagan, but they failed to practice the law which they taught.

2. *You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal?* - 2:21

The eighth commandment prohibits all stealing (Exodus 20:15). The word *steal* in this passage alludes to a secret thief rather than one who robs openly. It refers to a person who is dishonest in his dealings with others. The Jews preached against stealing but they practiced dishonesty when they thought no one was looking. Can you think of ways in which people do the same today?

3. You who say, "*Do not commit adultery,*" do you commit adultery? 2:22

Adultery was not unusual for men living in the Roman Empire in the first century, but Jews were called to a higher standard. God's seventh commandment forbids adultery (Exodus 20:14). And it was Jesus who set the standard. *You have heard that it was said to those of old, "You shall not commit adultery."* But I say to you that *whoever looks at a woman to lust for her*

*has already committed adultery with her in his heart* (Matthew 5:27-28).

4. *You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?* - 2:22

God had commanded that His people were not to make, worship, or serve idols (Exodus 20:4-5). Any upstanding Jew abhorred idols. In fact, Paul shows by his choice of words to what extent this was true. The word translated *abhor* is from a Greek family of words which denotes a bad smell. *Abhor* literally means "to turn away from something on account of the stench." Paul asks the idol hating Jews, *do you rob temples?* He may have been referring either to withholding tithes from the Jewish temple or a self-righteous religious looting of the pagan temples. Either way their purpose was personal profit.

5. *You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law?* - 2:23

To break the law was to dishonor God. The Jews were God's chosen people and they gloried in His law. They proudly taught the law to their children and to Gentile proselytes. What greater reproach could come to God than for His people to break His law!

"Was there ever a more beautiful veil than that under which the Jew presents himself? He is a man of confession, of praise; a man whose trust is in the law, whose boast is of God, who knows His will, who approves of things that are excellent; a man who calls himself a conductor of the blind, a light of those who are in darkness, an instructor of the ignorant, a teacher of babes; a man who directs others, who preaches against theft, against adultery, against idolatry; and to sum up the whole, a man who glories in the commandments of the Lord....But observe what is concealed under this mask. It is a man who is himself untaught; it is a thief, an adulterer, a sacrilegious person,—in one word, a wicked man, who continually dishonors God by the transgression of His law." (Exposition of Romans, Robert Haldane).

6. *The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you* - 2:24

Paul's accusation comes directly from Scripture. Ezekiel 36:19-20 speaks of God's judgment upon Israel for defiling the beautiful land He had given them. He scattered them among the pagan nations who blasphemed the holy name of God because His people had left His land. In the same way, because of their pompous pride and wicked ways, the Jews had now given the Gentiles opportunity to blaspheme God.

## II. The True Significance of Circumcision - Romans 2:25-29

"Paul pursues the Jew into his last retreat, in which he imagined himself most secure...circumcision—that rite even more ancient than Moses, and by which they were distinguished from the other nations." (Exposition of Romans, Robert Haldane). The Jews thought that because they were God's circumcised covenant people, they had the unconditional favor of God. Paul shows that the outward sign of circumcision was meant to point to an inward commitment of the heart to holiness.

### A. Circumcision and the law - Romans 2:25-27

God's covenant with Abraham is recorded in Genesis 17:9-14. Every Jewish male was to be circumcised when he was eight days old as a sign and seal of God's promise to bless Abraham and his descendants (the Jews), to make them a mighty nation, protect them, and bless all the families of the earth through them.

#### 1. Circumcision and the law - 2:25-27

Being a part of the covenant meant keeping the covenant by practicing the law, as Paul had written in verse 13, being *doers of the law*. Breaking the law was a violation of the covenant and stripped the outward sign of all its significance. Circumcision became *uncircumcision*.

##### a. Real circumcision - 2:26

Real circumcision is responding with obedience to what God has revealed and the Jews had not responded to the law with obedience. When a Gentile (uncircumcised man), in spite of having no written law, responds with gratitude and obedience to what God has made evident, that is true circumcision. A perfect example of this is Cornelius, a Roman centurion, *a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always* (Acts 10:1-2). God heard his prayers and sent the apostle Peter to preach the gospel to him. Acts 10 records the exciting outcome of this amazing event.

##### b. Rhetorical question - 2:27

Paul brings up a very disturbing question, and it is clear that the answer is affirmative. The uncircumcised person who trusts God and obeys His law will *judge* the circumcised person who is disobedient. C.E.B. Cranfield explains what Paul means by judge, "it is not that the Gentile will pronounce sentence on the Jew but probably that he will be a witness for the prosecution in the sense that his relative obedience will be evidence of what the Jew ought to have been and could have been" (Romans, A Shorter Commentary). See Matthew 12:41-42 for two examples of this.

#### 2. Outward sign or inward reality - 2:28-29

Circumcision was an outward sign which pointed to an inward reality. But the Jews did not regard inward character, only whether a person was circumcised or not. They looked down their noses upon any uncircumcised person. Paul shows that it is the inward reality which is important and not the outward sign.

a. *He is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh - 2:28*

"With one stroke Paul was abolishing the very basis of Jewish thought" (Romans Volume 1, James Montgomery Boice).

b. *But he is a Jew who is one inwardly - 2:29*

*Circumcision is that of the heart*, meaning true circumcision penetrates to the inner depths of the soul and changes a person.

Circumcision is *in the Spirit, and not in the letter*. This means it is a spiritual reality and not merely strict compliance to the outer requirements of the law.

True circumcision finds its praise *not from men but from God*. The one who is right on the inside looks for praise from God and not from men. Jesus asked the Jews: *How can you believe, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that comes from the only God?* (John 5:44). It is God alone who sees the inside of man, and it is the inside that matters to Him. *The Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart* (1 Samuel 16:7).

## III. The True Advantage of the Jew - Romans 3:1-8

Both Gentiles and Jews are willful sinners and under condemnation, both need the gospel, and there is no partiality with God (Romans 2:11). Furthermore, if God's people are designated only as those who are His inwardly and spiritually, *what advantage then has the Jew...what is the profit of circumcision?* Paul answers, *Much in every way!* But although the Jew has an advantage, it is nullified by disobedience.

A. *To them were committed the oracles of God - Romans 3:2*

The first and greatest privilege of the Jews is that God entrusted them with His word (*oracles*), the Holy Scriptures, our Old Testament today, which includes God's promises, law, prophecies, and covenant. The

Greek word for *oracle* is "logion" which means "divinely authoritative communications, before which men stand in awe and to which they bow in humility: and this high meaning is not merely implicit, but is explicit in the term" (B.B. Warfield, as quoted in Romans Volume 1, James Montgomery Boice).

"Today, God's people are blessed with not only the Old Testament, but also the New Testament which includes the gospels, the history of the church, the letters of doctrine and practical application, and the revelation. Can any of us experience anything in life of greater personal advantage to our souls than possession of the Holy Scriptures? Of course not! Without them we are utterly confused, adrift on a sea of human speculation where all the great questions of life are concerned" (Romans Volume 1, James Montgomery Boice).

### B. *The faithfulness of God* - Romans 3:3-4

Paul presents another rhetorical question. Will the faithlessness of some Jews nullify the faithfulness of God? Paul's answer is emphatic: "*Certainly not!*" God will surely keep His promises even if some individual Jews do not believe. God is sovereign and just. He does not break His promises. Even if every person on earth was in agreement that God had not been faithful to His promises, it would only prove that every person is a liar!

#### 1. *Let God be true* - 3:4

God is always completely reliable regardless of what people do.

#### 2. *But every man a liar* - 3:4

In contrast to God, every man is the opposite of true. Human actions do not stop God from keeping His promises. God is faithful!

#### 3. Quote from Psalm 51:4 - 3:4

Paul confirms his answer with a quotation from Scripture. In Psalm 51, David confesses his sin and acknowledges that his sin is against God. Therefore, (and this is the portion which Paul quotes): *That You may be justified in Your words, and may overcome when You are judged.* In other words, God is proved right and purely blameless in His judgments. His words prove Him right when He judges.

### C. *The justice of God* - Romans 3:5-8

Paul presents questions which may arise from what he has just written concerning God's faithfulness. At the same time he is countering abuses which may result from objections to his teaching.

#### 1. The question (objection) concerning God's righteousness - 3:5

The question Paul puts forth is this: is God fair to inflict wrath when the sin of unbelief (as in verse 3) has glorified Him by showing that He keeps His promises in spite of the faithlessness of men? After all, the sin has proved valuable by showing God's righteousness so much more clearly. So how can it be right for God to inflict wrath on the sinner?

Paul qualifies these questions by stating *I speak as a man*. Marvin Vincent, in Word Studies in the New Testament, explains that in asking the questions, Paul was deeply conscious that he was "using language which is intrinsically improper when applied to God." Paul presents the question "in condescension to human weakness," using language normally applied to human relationships because of the limited understanding and shortsightedness of man.

#### 2. Paul's answer - 3:6

Paul's reply is, *Certainly not! For then how will God judge the world?* It was impossible for Paul to think of God as unjust and he does not waste time arguing the point. If God were unjust, there could be no judgment of the world. But He is just, and the Day of Judgment is a certainty (1 Chronicles 16:33; Psalm 9:7; Psalm 96:13; Ecclesiastes 3:17; Acts 17:30-31; Hebrews 9:27; 2 Peter 3:7). Judgment necessitates the punishment of some, so God's wrath on sin is real and justice will be shown on Judgment Day.

#### 3. The self-centered, self-righteous question (objection) - 3:7

This question presents basically the same argument as Romans 3:5, but now the question is focused on the punishment of the sinner rather than the judgment of God and is presented in terms of truth and lies. *If my lies show more fully the truth of God and glorify Him, why am I being punished as a sinner?*

#### 4. Paul's answer - 3:8

Paul takes the argument to its obvious irrational conclusion by asking another question. *If good is going to come out of our sin, then why not do evil so good may come?* Apparently there were some who accused Paul of teaching this very thing, and he considered their accusations slander. The subject is obviously an important one since Paul argues this same question more fully in Romans 6:1-23.

#### 5. Conclusion - 3:8

*Their condemnation is just* may be directed to the

slanderers, to those who argue this argument, or to those who advocate sinning so good may come. All three would be justly entitled to it.

NOTE: Paul's presentation of the argument in Romans 3:8, *let us do evil that good may come*, was the beginning of what is called antinomianism, from the Greek "anti" (against) and "nomos" (law). Antinomianism claims that the Christian has no need for the law of God. *What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?* (Romans 6:15). This is a false teaching which has plagued the church throughout its history. We know from Paul's letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 5-6) that there were those in the church who taught that believers, being justified by faith, were not obligated to obey the moral law. This was also the teaching of Gnosticism which crept into the early church. In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther wrote against the antinomians of his day. Today, existentialist ethics, situational ethics, moral relativism, and liberalism may be seen as forms of antinomianism.

### Applications

1. Paul has pointed out the privileges of the Jews and their responsibilities in light of those privileges. What are your greatest privileges as a Christian? What is your responsibility to God? Do you value your privileges and responsibilities? How do you show your gratitude to God?
2. Has your conversion to Christianity resulted in humility or pride? How would others view you: as humble or proud?
3. Do you look to outward things such as baptism, tithing, church attendance, practice of disciplines, or service to validate your Christianity? Or do you patiently rely upon the grace of God to change you from within as you feed upon His word and submit to Him?
4. Do you make excuses for your sin? What irrational arguments do you use to rationalize your sin?



**QUESTIONS**

Questions are based on the New King James Version of the Bible.

**Day One: Read all notes and references.**

1. a. List some special privileges of the Jews?  
  
b. What was their great advantage? In what way do you have the same advantage?
  
2. What did you learn from this lesson that was new to you?

**Day Two: Read Romans 3:9-31.**

3. What do you learn about the law from this passage?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. a. How many times do you find *none* or *not one*? Give verses. In each case tell what is true of *none* and *not one*.  
  
b. What have *all* done in verses 12 and 23?  
  
c. What does this reveal about human nature?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. How many times do you find the word *justified*? Give verses along with what you learn about being *justified*.

**Day Three: Read Romans 3:9-12.**

6. a. What rhetorical question does Paul ask?  
  
b. What is his answer?  
  
c. Use Romans 3:19 to explain what it means to be *under sin*.  
  
d. What proof from Scripture does Paul give to support his contention that all are *under sin*? Give phrases with their Old Testament Scripture reference (found in the margin of your Bible).

7. Go back through Romans 1 through 3 to find some words, phrases, or statements which illustrate the sinfulness of man as described in the Scripture references above (in Romans 3:10-12).

**Day Four: Read Romans 3:13-20.**

8. a. What specific evil does Paul describe in verses 13-14?
- b. ♥ (Heart Question) Do you see yourself in this description at all? If so, in what way?
- c. What further insight do you gain from James 3:6-10?
9. a. What evils are described in Romans 3:15-17?
- b. How are these evils evident in our world today?
10. a. What is Paul's final Scripture quotation (3:18)?
- b. Use Psalm 36:1-4 to describe what this means.
11. a. To whom does the law speak and for what purpose? Give verse.
- b. Use Romans 11:32 and Galatians 3:22 to explain why it was necessary for all the world to become guilty before God.
12. a. According to Romans 3:20, why are those who are under the law guilty?
- b. What is the real purpose of the law?
- c. How does Galatians 3:23-24 further explain the purpose of the law?

**Day Five: Read Romans 3:21-24**

13. a. When do you think *now* (verse 21) is?



- b. What is *now* revealed?
  - c. How is it revealed?
  - d. Through whom is it revealed?
  - e. To whom is it revealed?
  - f. Where would you look to find testimony (witness) regarding this?
  - g. In light of Romans 3:19-20, what do you think is the best news in verses 21-22?
14. a. Which verse sums up what Paul has just explained in Romans 3:9-18 and also in his whole letter thus far?
- b. Of what do sinners fall short?
  - c. What does this mean to you?
15. a. What free gift do all who believe (verse 22) receive? (See verse 24.)
- b. What is the source of this gift?
  - c. By whose work was this gift made possible?
  - d. What did He do to make it possible?
16. What do the following Scripture passages teach about redemption and how it is accomplished?
- Leviticus 25:47-49
- Ephesians 1:7
- Colossians 1:13-14

**Day Six: Read Romans 3:25-31**

17. a. What price did Jesus pay to accomplish God's purpose of redemption? Give verse.
- b. How do the following Scripture passages support this?  
Matthew 26:28
- Acts 20:28
- Hebrews 9:11-12
- 1 Peter 1:18-20

18. a. What does *propitiation* mean? Use a dictionary if you like.

b. What more do you learn about *propitiation* in the following passages?

Romans 5:9

Hebrews 2:17

1 John 4:9-10

19. a. What was God's purpose in justifying believers through the redemptive work of Christ? Give verse.

b. Why was it necessary that God demonstrate His righteousness? Give verse.

c. What was the result of this demonstration of His righteousness? Give verse.

20. a. What must a sinner have to be justified? List all the verses where you find this.

b. What effect does this have on the law?