

Lesson 8: Who Is a Jew? (2:17-29)

# The Gospel According To Paul: Romans

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## **The Guilt of the Jews (2:1-3:20)**

***Being a Jew and Knowing the Law Does Not Exempt One from  
the Guilt of Transgression of the Law (2:17-29)***

*Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking (transgressing) the law? As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you" (Isaiah 52:5; Ezek. 36:22). (Rom 2:17-24)*

*Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker. A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is*

*one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God. (Rom 2:25-29)*

### **Israel's Claims of Superiority to the Gentiles (1:17-20)**

***You call yourself a Jew:*** They were the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel, the children of Israel, the people of God, the chosen of God.

***You rely on or have the law:*** the ones to whom God had spoken through the prophets, beginning with Moses, the ones entrusted with the oracles of God.

***You boast*** (*kauchaomai* - glory in, take pride, rejoice) ***about your relationship to God*** (the Greek says, "you boast or glory in God"). They were his chosen people; their history of God went back almost two thousand of years (counting from Abraham).

***You know his will and approve of what is superior:*** They had been given special revelation from God, which gave them special insight into the will of God.

***You are instructed*** (*katecheo* - to teach orally, to instruct) ***by the law:*** They had been taught, from childhood, the moral instruction of God.

***You are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants.***

***You have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth.*** They had the Torah, the Hebrew Scriptures, believed to be inspired of God. Not only had God revealed himself to them, but he had spoken to them, and they had a written record of that communication.

Moses had instructed Israel to show kindness to the stranger or foreigners among them (Lev 19:34, Deut 10-18-19) and through this kindness many had become believers in *Yahweh* (strangers of the covenant, godfearers, or proselytes). Isaiah had told them that God desired that the Gentiles believe in him and foretold that he would one day make a covenant

with the Gentiles (Isa 42:2, 49:6, 60:3, 62:2, 66:19).

Joe Shulam, in his *Commentary on the Jewish roots of Romans*, makes reference to a Jewish *Midrashim* (collections of rabbinic interpretations) on the role of those who know the Law and endeavor to teach it to others.

All the commandments which a man obeys in this world radiate no more light than the light of a single lamp, but the Torah gives light from one end of the world to the other . . . As for him who knows how to provide guidance and does provide it for multitudes, such a man gives delight to Him (God) at whose word the world came into being. For it says, "As for them who provide guidance, everyone of them gives delight, and so the blessing of the Good come upon them (Prov 24:25). (Shulam, p. 99)

### **Being Keepers of the Law Requires More Than Being in Possession of the Law (2:21-29)**

Following vv 17-20, in vv 21-29, he enters into a cross-examination designed to confront his assumed opponent with the typical inconsistencies of those who hear (*shama* – to hear with the ear) the Law but do not heed (*shamar* – to hear with action) the Law. You who teach others, you don't take heed to your own teaching, while you preach against stealing, you steal, while you say that one must not commit adultery, you commit adultery, you who claim to abhor idols, you steal them out of temples, you boast in the law, yet you dishonor God by breaking the law, even the Scriptures speak of the effects of your inconsistencies: "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you," (Isaiah 52:5).

The Jews always considered themselves in a specially privileged position with God. "God," they said, "loves Israel alone of all the nations of the earth." "God will judge the Gentiles with one measure and the Jews with another." "All Israelites will have part in the world to come." When Justin Martyr was arguing with the Jew about the position of the Jews in the "*Dialogue with Trypho*," the Jew said, "They who are the seed of Abraham according to the flesh shall in any case, even if they be sinners and unbelieving and disobedient towards God, share in the eternal Kingdom." The writer of the Book of Wisdom comparing God's attitude to Jews and Gentiles said: "These

(Israel) as a father, admonishing them, thou didst prove; but those (Gentiles) as a stern king, condemning them, thou didst search out" (Wis.11:9). "While therefore thou dost chasten us (Israel) thou scourgest our enemies a thousand times more" (Wis.12:22). The Jew believed that everyone was destined for judgment except himself. It would not be any special goodness that kept him immune from the wrath of God, but simply the fact that he was a Jew. (William Barclay, on Romans 2:1-11, *Daily Study Bible Series, Liguori Faithware*)

### **The Letter of the Law and the Spirit of the Law (2:25-29)**

It appears that the Jews assumed their relationship with God was secured by their membership in the commonwealth of Israel. Faithfulness in Judaism consisted of confessing oneself to be a Jew, circumcision for males, keeping the Sabbath, observing the feasts of Israel, and keeping the ritual and dietary laws. In essence, theirs was a corporate righteousness; if they were a part of the Jewish community of believers, wherein existed the evidences of God dwelling with Israel (Ark of the Covenant, the Holy of Holies, the Hebrew Scriptures) they were in good standing with God. The Ark was gone; the Holy of Holies was in the Temple in Jerusalem. The only universal evidence of God's presence with the Jews was *Torah*! They had the codes, the statutes, judgments, and commandments – *Ha Torah*, which they kept "to the letter!" But they didn't keep "the spirit of the Law;" a case in point, circumcision.

*Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. <sup>26</sup>If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? <sup>27</sup>The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code (ton dia gramma - the letter of the Law) and circumcision, are a lawbreaker. <sup>28</sup>A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly (en to phanero en sarki, Lit. in the manifestation of the flesh), nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. <sup>29</sup>No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly (en to krupto - in the vault, a hidden place, inside); and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit (en pneumatic - in spirit), not by the written code (gramma - letter of the Law). Such a man's*

*praise is not from men, but from God.*

Jewishness, Paul says, is not a matter of race or of circumcision; these are by-products and consequences of your Jewishness. Men are sons of Abraham because they are a people of faith, like Abraham. Their beliefs and the effect of their beliefs on their lives is what made them acceptable to God, not because of who their parents were. It is a matter of character and conduct not heritage that makes one truly a son/daughter of God. All of the terminology or designations used by the Jews, as well as their rituals, were words or behaviors given to the people of God; they were the inheritors of the promises made to the patriarchs of Israel. The behavior of Abraham is what made him righteous in the eyes of God, so also with Isaac and Jacob. The bloodline means nothing if the behavior is not there. Many of the Gentiles behaved more like sons of the patriarchs than did those who claimed to be the sons of Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob/Israel.

The sense of the passage is that God's promises are not to people of a certain race and to people who bear a certain mark on their bodies. They are to people who live a certain kind of life irrespective of their race. To be a real Jew (an heir of the promises of God - mwl) is not a matter of pedigree but of character; and often the man who is not racially a Jew may be a better Jew than the man who is. (William Barclay, *Ibid.*)

### **Corporate Righteousness Vs Individual Righteous**

One's righteousness, or one's guilt, before God is determined by their individual behavior, not their heritage, their class, their race, their education, their fame, their fortune, nor their exclusiveness as a member of a community of believers, whether the community of Israel or the community of Christ. This type of thinking has been around a long time. A great number of "communicates" to "The Church" believe themselves to be safe from the judgment of God because of their relationship to the church.. This is true within a number of religious traditions. If one is "a member of the church" he will be saved in the last day by virtue of that fact alone. Being a member of the Lord's church is a great privilege and carries with it great advantages, but it does not guarantee one salvation any more than being a Jew guaranteed them a status of righteousness.

If our lives are not transformed by our belief in Christ and our moral

character is not a reflection of the moral character of Christ, and if our attitudes toward ourselves and others is not consistent with who we claim to be in Christ, our membership in the church will not help us at all when we stand before God in judgment.

Paul is not the only one who addressed this issue within first century Judaism. Jesus, himself, addressed this issue throughout his ministry. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), individual righteousness vs a righteousness earned through faithfulness to the traditions of the elders (corporate righteousness through the acceptance of the dogma) is precisely the issue Jesus was addressing. This can be seen in the beatitudes, listed in Matt 5:3-12, each of which addresses the issue of individual moral character as set over against the concept of corporate righteousness.

*Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them saying: "Blessed are **the poor in spirit** (an individual characteristic), for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are **those who mourn** (an individual characteristic), for they will be comforted. Blessed are **the meek** (an individual characteristic), for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are **those who hunger and thirst for righteousness** (an individual characteristic), for they will be filled. Blessed are **the merciful** (an individual characteristic), for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are **the pure in heart** (an individual characteristic), for they will see God. Blessed are **the peacemakers**, (an individual characteristic), for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are **those who are persecuted because of righteousness** (an individual characteristic), for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me (those individuals whose faithfulness to Christ brings persecution). Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

What Jesus is saying in his Sermon on the Mount is the same thing Paul is saying in his letter to the Romans, chapters 2-3. Being a Jew is not enough to please God. Paul lists their "credentials,"

*<sup>17</sup>Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; <sup>18</sup>if you know his will and approve of*

*what is superior because you are instructed by the law; <sup>19</sup>if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, <sup>20</sup>an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—*

But, says Paul, a Jew, an Israelite, a son of Jacob, a son of Isaac, a son of Abraham is the man who reflects what this heritage was supposed to developed in them.

*<sup>28</sup>A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision (the seal of Abraham the father of faith) merely outward and physical. <sup>29</sup>No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is **circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code**. Such a man's praise is not from men (the approval of the keepers of the traditions – the elders, the trustees of the dogma), but from God.*

There is more to being a Jew than having the written codes of the law in hand and being a part of the commonwealth of Israel. The Judaism of the “letter of the Law,” Paul argues, provided the son of Israel an opportunity to know the word of God in written form, to be a part of an ancient religious tradition, and be called a Jew. Beyond that, the Jew had no more than the Greek or Gentile. The purpose of the law was to function as a “schoolmaster” to take Israel from their existence following the exodus from Egypt to a stage of development wherein their moral character was a reflection of the moral image of God. It didn’t happen! What they did with what they had was turn it into icons of worship: the scrolls containing the statues, judgments, and commandments became virtual objects of worship rather than the God they revealed. There were Greek/Gentiles in the world who reflected more of the spirit of the law in their lives than those entrusted with the written Oracles. What they had was “written codes” by which people were controlled not oracles of God by which people were transformed into people who knew that they are created in the image of God!

### **Conclusion**

Moral development is an individual thing, morality can be taught “by the book,” but moral character can only be developed “by the person.” God meets man where he finds him. He came here to re-claim his creation, and

he does that “one person at a time!” One’s relationship with God can only occur on an individual basis. As an individual one may be a part of a community of believers, just as a child may be a member of a family, but one’s relationship with God can only be realized on an individual basis, just as a parent independent of the other children of the family knows his or her child.

In Matt 5:13-16, Jesus speaks of one’s image (or example) in the eyes of his fellowman. We, as individuals, are to be like salt and light in terms of how people see us. We are beings created in the image of God, our lives (our behavior) should reflect that image. In his teaching and preaching, Jesus called all those hearing him to individual righteousness. He challenged those who heard him to characterize themselves by a kind of behavior that would cause people to see God in them - to see them as beings created in the image of God.

*"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*

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