

July 3  
Lesson 5

# NEEDING MORE THAN LAW

DEVOTIONAL READING: 1 Peter 1:13-23

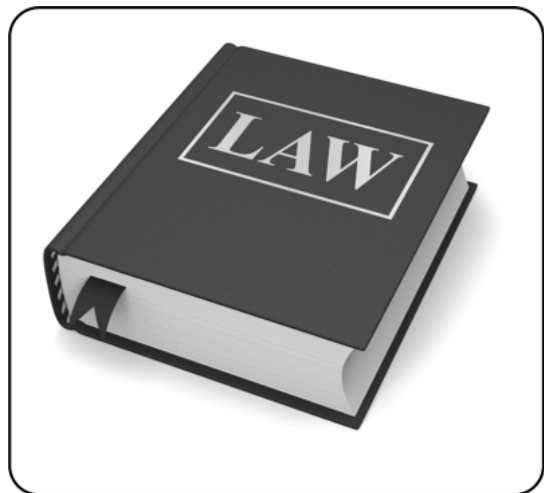
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Romans 2

## ROMANS 2:17-29

<sup>17</sup> Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in 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 little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—<sup>21</sup> you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? <sup>22</sup> You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? <sup>23</sup> You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? <sup>24</sup> As it is written: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”

<sup>25</sup> 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> So then, 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 and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.

<sup>28</sup> A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. <sup>29</sup> No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person’s praise is not from other people, but from God.



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## KEY VERSE

**It is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.**

—Romans 2:13

## LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. State the difference between knowing God’s law and obeying God’s law.
2. Contrast the person who knows more of God’s law but does not obey with the person who knows less yet does obey.
3. Repent of failure to act on what he or she knows of God’s law.

## LESSON OUTLINE

### Introduction

- A. With Privilege Comes Responsibility
- B. Lesson Background

### I. High Calling (ROMANS 2:17-20)

- A. Boastful Knowledge (vv. 17, 18)
- B. Self-Assured Ability (vv. 19, 20)

### II. Betrayed Calling (ROMANS 2:21-23)

- A. Preaching but Not Practicing (vv. 21, 22)
- B. Boasting but Not Honoring (v. 23)

### III. Sad Results (ROMANS 2:24, 25)

- A. Blasphemy (v. 24)  
*Corrupting the Calling*
- B. Uncircumcision (v. 25)

### IV. True Sign (ROMANS 2:26-29)

- A. Not Lineage but Obedience (vv. 26, 27)
- B. Not Outward but Inward (vv. 28, 29)  
*What's on the Inside?*

### Conclusion

- A. Claiming Privilege
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

## Introduction

### A. With Privilege Comes Responsibility

The story is told that when Queen Elizabeth II of England was a young girl, her father, King George VI, told her to do something. "I am a princess," she is said to have replied, "and I will do as I please."

"Yes, you are a princess," said her father. "And that is why, for the rest of your life, you will never simply do as you please."

Privilege brings not just honor or power but responsibility. The greater the privilege, the greater the responsibility. Our lesson text is a solemn restatement of this principle. Paul reminded his Christian readers of Jewish background that their high calling as guardians of God's law carried the responsibility of obedience. This is a responsibility that they, along with all people, had failed.

### B. Lesson Background

Among Paul's aims in his letter to the church at Rome is to demonstrate that the gospel is God's power for salvation for both Jew and Gentile (Romans 1:16). Both had failed to submit to the God who created them and revealed himself to them, despite any claim of advantage one group might press over the other.

Although Gentiles had not received the special revelation of God's law that had been given to Israel through Moses, Gentiles were nonetheless fully responsible for their rebellion against God. This is because God had sufficiently revealed himself and his will to them in creation itself (Romans 1:18-20; last week's lesson).

In Romans 2, Paul turned to Jews to show them the problem of their own situation. Israel's law and history stood together in Israel's sacred Scriptures. That history showed repeatedly the failure of those who received God's law to keep it. Any advantage that Israel had in receiving God's law at Sinai had been squandered through disobedience.

This realization could come to Jews through more than just reading their people's history in the Scriptures. Observing the world around them could demonstrate the same. Many Jews of the period regarded the priestly leadership of the temple as corrupt and illegitimate. Pressure to conform to social norms meant that many Jews lived more like their Gentile neighbors than as people devoted to God's law. There were few reasons for religiously sensitive Jews to think that their generation was better at keeping God's law than their ancestors had been. For those who thought otherwise, Paul had some sobering—and stern—reminders.

## I. High Calling

(ROMANS 2:17-20)

### A. Boastful Knowledge (vv. 17, 18)

**17. Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God;**

Paul addresses a portion of his audience very directly here, with emphasis on *you* as if to speak to each Jewish Christian individually. Does a person call himself or herself *a Jew* as a way of claiming status as one of God's people? Does that person rely on the Law of Moses to establish that standing? Does that person express pride in being a member of God's people and not part of the pagan rabble who know nothing of the true God?

Paul is beginning to show that such confidence is misplaced. Since the dawn of Israel's history, true membership in God's people has depended on more than just belonging to the nation or receiving God's law. Israel's prophets decried confidence that was placed in outward markers of identity ([Jeremiah 7:4; 8:8](#)). Paul's words are in line with theirs (compare [Luke 3:8](#)).

**18. if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law;**

The description of the person who claims privilege of membership in God's people continues. This person has not simply received the Law of Moses but also knows it well, having been instructed in it continually.

## HOW TO SAY IT

centurion *sen-ture-ee-un.*

Cornelius *Cor-neel-yus.*

Gentiles *Jen-tiles.*

Isaiah *Eye-zay-uh.*

Jeremiah *Jair-uh-my-uh.*

Malachi *Mal-uh-kye.*

Sinai *Sigh-nye or Sigh-nay-eye.*

As a result, such a person can clearly describe how God's law provides a better way of living than do the ways of the pagan world. This is the individual who loudly endorses the teaching of God's Word, pointing out how far others have strayed from it. Being part of the "in-group," knowing and approving of what the in-group believes, is for such a person the basis for believing that one is right with God.

### B. Self-Assured Ability ([vv. 19, 20](#))

**19. if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark,**

Now the description begins to look outward. A Jew can fairly claim that God has called the people of Israel to make him known to the pagan nations around them. Surrounded by peoples who are ignorant of God and filled with moral corruption, it is easy to characterize others as *blind* and *in the dark*. It is easy to see one's own knowledge of God's law as the solution.

But notice how easily such a perception can turn to arrogance. When forgetting that God had to rescue Israel time and again from consequences of disobedience, the Jew can begin to imagine that God's "chosen" people are simply better than others. This line of self-delusion leads one to become not a *guide for the blind* but one of the hypocritical "blind guides" that Jesus condemned ([Matthew 23:16, 24](#)).

*What Do You Think?*

What will be your role in improving your church's efforts in being a "guide" and a "light" to those in spiritual darkness?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

In sharing the gospel

In improving your own discipleship

Other

**20. an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—**

As the argument continues, it becomes more obvious that Paul is describing one who takes a condescending position. The term translated *instructor* is used especially of those who teach youngsters, and that implication is strengthened in the phrase *a teacher of little children*.

*What Do You Think?*

In what ways do Christians sometimes project a "holier than thou" attitude because of their knowledge of God's Word? How do we deal with this problem?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

Language we use

Attitudes we exhibit

Actions we take

Assumptions we make

Other

## II. Betrayed Calling

(ROMANS 2:21-23)

### A. Preaching but Not Practicing (vv. 21, 22)

#### 21. you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal?

Paul turns from describing the individual who claims privilege as God's person to pointing out that person's hypocritical failure. Claiming to be a guide, a light, a teacher is one thing, but heeding one's own teaching is another. Are Paul's readers practicing what they preach?

As Paul asks about *stealing*, we can imagine a person responding, "No, I have never stolen anything." But we must keep in mind that being innocent of theft outwardly is not all there is to this issue. Jesus stressed that true righteousness exists on the inside as well as the outside (compare [Matthew 23:25-28](#)). The Law of Moses made the same point with the last of the Ten Commandments prohibiting coveting, which is an inward disposition ([Exodus 20:17](#)). Withholding of tithes to the temple ([Malachi 3:8-10](#)) or failing to give support to the poor ([Isaiah 10:1, 2](#)) were forms of theft in the view of Israel's prophets. Selfishness constitutes theft from the standpoint of the God who examines the human heart.

#### 22. You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

The description of hypocrisy continues. Those who condemn the pagan world's sexual immorality need to consider whether their own hearts harbor lust ([Matthew 5:27, 28](#)). Those who condemn idolatry need to consider whether their behavior is more in line with worship of an idol than devotion to the true God.

Israel's prophets had condemned hypocritical worship in the temple as being more directed to false gods than the true God ([Jeremiah 7:9-11](#); etc.). Those who claim to know God's Word must be at least as mindful of such things as they are of others' failures.

### B. Boasting but Not Honoring (v. 23)

#### 23. You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?

Paul states the dangerous problem directly. The person who boasts *in the law* is the one who claims special identity and privilege because he or she knows God's law. But if knowing does not lead to obeying, it is hardly of value. God is not at all honored by the person who knows his Word but does not follow it. To boast in such a thing is to invite condemnation, not to receive blessing.

The right response is to make our identity not in what we know but in what God has done for us. God's people have always been God's people because of his grace, not because of their knowledge or any accomplishment. To make our stand on God's grace leads to obedience that reflects our gratitude to and dependency on the one who has saved us.

#### *What Do You Think?*

In what areas do Christians seem to need most to improve in making their practice of God's Word match their knowledge of it? Why?

#### *Talking Points for Your Discussion*

Regarding what can be seen by everyone

Regarding what can be seen only by family members and close friends

Regarding what can be seen only by God

## III. Sad Results

(ROMANS 2:24-25)

### A. Blasphemy (v. 24)

#### 24. As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

The place where this *is written* is the old Greek version of [Isaiah 52:5](#). Thus the issue of bringing disgrace to *God's name* is hardly new. Hypocrisy among God's people brings his reputation into disrepute among those who do not know him. Israel's calling is to bring light to the nations ([Isaiah 49:6](#)). But Israel's failure to obey God creates an excuse for *the Gentiles* to continue to reject Israel's God.

### CORRUPTING THE CALLING

Before the scandals of evangelists Jim Bakker in 1987, Jimmy Swaggart in 1988 and 1991, and Ted Haggard in 2006, there was that of Aimee Semple McPherson (1890-1944). Her notoriety was such that it resulted in a Broadway musical titled *Scandalous: The Life and Trials of Aimee Semple McPherson*. One synopsis of the play states that she "was the world's first media superstar evangelist whose passion for saving souls equaled her passion for making headlines."

And make headlines she did! She was divorced more than once (quite a scandalous thing in the first half of the twentieth century). She was accused of lying. She built a 5,000-seat megachurch in Los Angeles. In 1926, she was thought to have drowned in the Pacific Ocean, then

rumored to have been kidnapped for \$500,000 ransom, then strangely appeared walking alone out of a Mexican desert into Douglas, Arizona. She knew how to use the media, and they loved her for it. Her followers idolized her, but many other Christians saw her as an embarrassment.

The world enjoys finding cracks in the façade of Christianity. As the publicity circus around McPherson's life demonstrates, this is especially true with regard to Christian leaders. Paul's challenge to us, whether leaders or not, is to live with such integrity that the cause of Christ is never subject to reproach (compare [1 Timothy 3:2-7](#); [1 Peter 2:12](#)). Do we?—C. R. B.

## B. Uncircumcision (v. 25)

### **25. Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised.**

*Circumcision* was the sign that God gave to Abraham to show that God had given that man a covenant promise ([Genesis 17:1-14](#)). Circumcision identified the male members of the people of that covenant, bound to obey God's commands and anticipating fulfillment of his promises. In that respect, circumcision was a valuable, important act for the people of Israel.

But to receive circumcision without keeping God's law was to make this covenant marker meaningless. The prophet Jeremiah stressed that genuine circumcision is focused on the inner person ([Jeremiah 4:4](#)). To claim to belong to God on the basis of physical circumcision alone is to reduce God to one who cares only for appearances.

The issue of circumcision is important for Paul's readers. Some first-century Jewish Christians insist that Gentile Christians must be circumcised to belong to God's people. Paul, along with the other apostles and church leaders, insists that the fulfillment of God's promises in Christ means that anyone can belong to God's people without that indicator ([Acts 15:1-29](#); [Galatians 2:1-16](#)).

#### *What Do You Think?*

What are some "externals" that may become sources of false confidence for today's Christians?  
Why?

#### *Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- Regarding ceremonies undergone
- Regarding organizational affiliations
- Regarding personal accomplishments
- Other

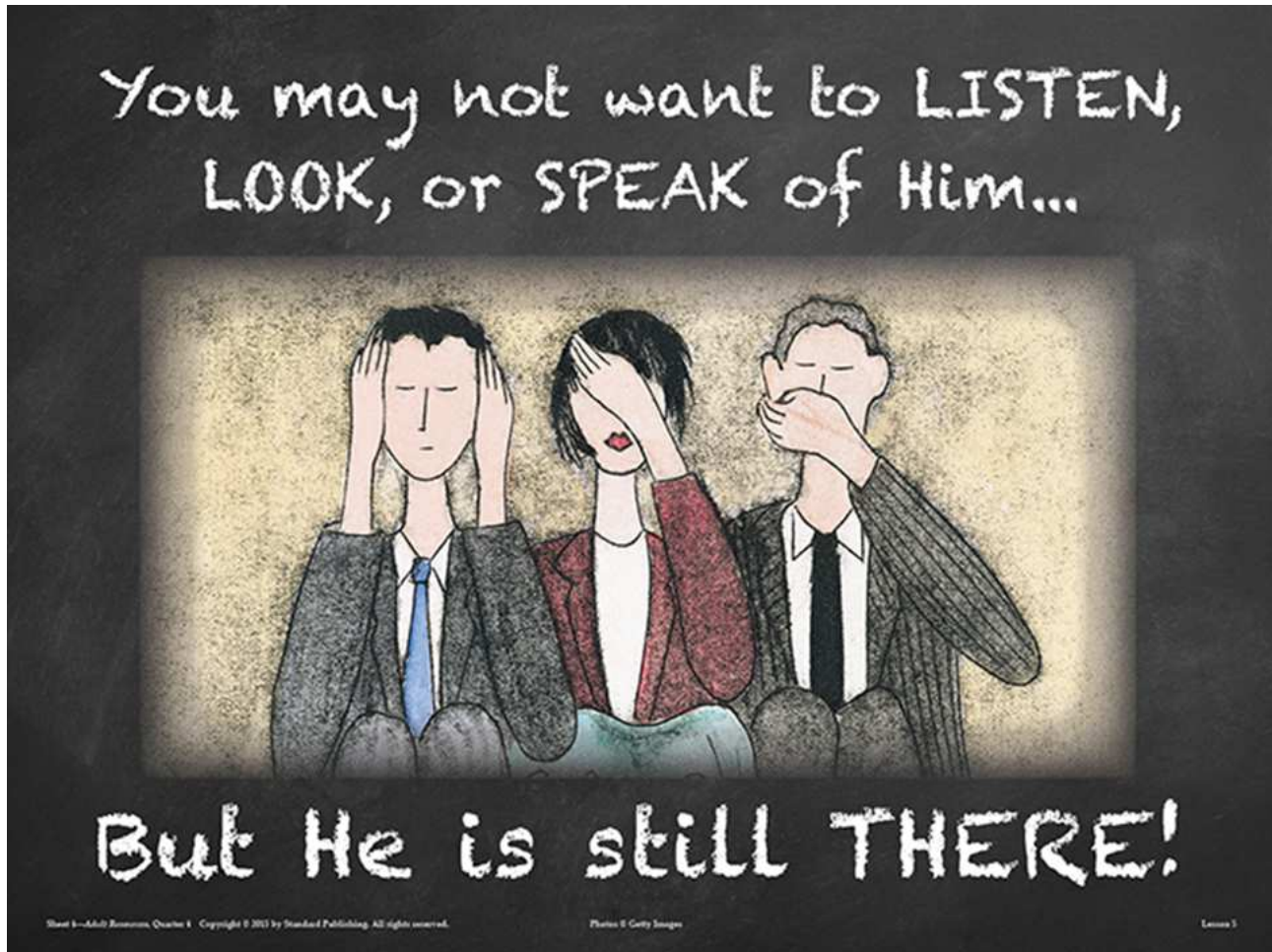
## IV. True Sign

([ROMANS 2:26-29](#))

### A. Not Lineage but Obedience (vv. 26, 27)

#### **26. So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised?**

To this point, Paul has described the person who claims membership in God's people but does not follow God's will as expressed in his law. Now Paul describes the opposite: the person who has no claim to membership in God's historic people but follows God's law nonetheless, knowing it as something written on the heart ([Romans 2:15](#)).



Visual for Lesson 5. Use this visual to start a discussion regarding how believers and unbelievers react to God's truth.

A key example is Cornelius, a Roman centurion described as “devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly” ([Acts 10:2](#)). His generosity to the needy contrasts with supposedly devout Jews of his day who use tradition to sidestep the Law of Moses (example: [Mark 7:6-13](#)).

So if an uncircumcised person does what the law requires, that person demonstrates true identity with God's people, true circumcision. The inward reality is what gives rise to obedience.

**27. 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.**

When Gentiles exhibit obedience to God, they provide a sharp contrast with the lack of obedience on the part of many in Israel. When Gentiles follow God's law even though they do not know him, they bring shame on Jews who claim to know him but fail to obey.

So simply being circumcised, simply belonging to the right group, brings no advantage. In fact, it brings the threat of judgment for those who claim the identity but do not live by it.

**B. Not Outward but Inward ([vv. 28, 29](#))**

**28. A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical.**

Paul sums up. Some (many? most?) of the Christians in Rome who claim special standing because of their Jewish identity and longstanding knowledge of God's law have reduced his concerns to the outward only. But the God who made the world knows the inner world of everyone. The God who reclaims his world through Christ seeks to rule over all people both outwardly and inwardly. Those who appear to belong to God's people outwardly but have no inner reality in that regard make a mockery of his authority.

The inward reality is where the problem exists for the seemingly righteous person. We may imagine ourselves “good enough” to belong to God if we consider only outward appearance and behavior in contrast with that of others. Yet the inward reality is what shows us our need despite our seeming status ([Matthew 23:27](#)). Likewise when our outward failures seem to condemn us, the inward reality of our readiness to receive God's



merciful forgiveness is what makes us able truly to be part of his people ([Luke 18:9-14](#)).

**29. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God.**

In the final statement of this section, Paul ties together many of the earlier biblical strands that make the same point. The inner life—that of *the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code*—is what truly controls a person (compare [2 Corinthians 3:6](#)). From the account of Cain's sin against Abel, in which anger provided the sinful impulse the power to act ([Genesis 4:5-8](#)), to Jesus' denunciation of hypocrisy among the religious leaders ([Matthew 23:1-36](#)), the Bible shows that our pride in ourselves masks the persistent evil that lurks inside.

God's focus has always been first on the inward life. He spoke to Cain about that inward reality before Cain committed his terrible deed. He reminded Samuel, who was seeking the king whom God had chosen, that "people look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" ([1 Samuel 16:7](#)). God's aim has always been to write his Word on the hearts of his people ([Jeremiah 31:33](#)). Simply knowing *the written code* offers no benefit if it is unaccompanied by the inner life. To live otherwise is to care more about what people think than about God's evaluation. For him to do his redemptive work in us, we must recognize our inner selves for what they are and allow God to create in us new attitudes of obedient submission.

### WHAT'S ON THE INSIDE?

In 1925, acclaimed poet T. S. Eliot wrote a 98-line poem titled "The Hollow Men" that envisioned the decline of Western civilization. The poem likened Western (Christian) culture to scarecrows stuffed with straw, which have the outward appearance of being alive but have no life inside.

Eliot's words have proven amazingly predictive. Some 90 years later, we see the evidence in a post-Christian Europe, where many of the great cathedrals are now mere museums. We can also see the evidence in historically Christian Canada and the U.S., nations that are increasingly secularized in philosophy and lifestyle. Eliot saw the world as he knew it coming to an end "Not with a bang but a whimper," as the spiritual forces that once gave life would simply give up and give in.

Jesus criticized religious leaders for appearing outwardly "as righteous" while being "full of hypocrisy and wickedness" on the inside ([Matthew 23:28](#)). Some Christians in Rome apparently placed their faith in the externals of religious observance instead of the internal virtues of a living faith. The danger of becoming "hollow Christians" is ever with us. Beware!—C. R. B.

#### What Do You Think?

What are some good steps Christians can take to become better circumcised-in-heart?

#### Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding awareness of one's situation
- Regarding "blind spots"
- Regarding interactions with the world
- Regarding prayer life
- Other

## Conclusion

### A. Claiming Privilege

The Israelites' failure to keep God's law affected not just themselves. God's promise was that all nations would be blessed through Abraham's offspring ([Genesis 22:18](#)), that Israel would become "a light for the Gentiles" ([Isaiah 42:6](#); [49:6](#)). So it seemed that Israel's unfaithfulness could prove to be the undoing of God's plans for the world.

But the gospel reveals something vital. Though Israel proved unfaithful, God brought his plan to fulfillment through one in Israel who *did* prove faithful, namely Jesus. His faithfulness, seen in submitting to death on the cross to take the punishment of the guilty, fulfilled God's purpose and solved the problem of human failure for both Jews and Gentiles. How great is our failure? The cross shows us. How powerful is God's solution to our failure? The cross shows us.

For the vast majority of us today, claiming spiritual privilege because of Jewish identity or circumcision seems very foreign. But we know how easy it is to claim such privilege on similar grounds. Looking at the chaotic world around us, we are tempted to congratulate ourselves that we know God and his Word. It is easy to observe the ignorance of the world and contrast that ignorance with what we know of God. Then it is all too easy to take the next step and think the difference has to do with something special about ourselves.

We would be better off contemplating the contrast between the good that other people see in us outwardly and the evil that we know still lives in our hearts. That reflection will lead us to think how God has welcomed us by his grace despite our failures. That in turn will remind us of how much we have in common with the world and of how much we have to share with it.

### B. Prayer

O God, we surrender our innermost selves to you! May we be yours, inside and out. We pray in the name of Jesus, who helps us make it so. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

Let the inward match the outward.

## INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

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### Into the Lesson

Distribute handouts of an abstract outline of a human in the top half and lines for writing in the bottom half. Say, “Taking no more than a minute, list at the bottom some characteristics of a person who follows Christ truly.” After calling time, ask learners to draw lines to connect those characteristics with the relevant parts of the human outline. (*Expected connections*: behaviors connect to hands and feet, spoken words to mouth, Bible knowledge to brain, and feelings to heart.)

Ask for volunteers to share their lists with the class as a whole. Working your way through the four areas of *behaviors*, *spoken words*, *knowledge*, and *feelings*, ask, “What would happen to the other three areas if this one were not in tune with God?” Make a transition by saying, “Following Christ involves the whole person. Outward obedience must demonstrate an inward reality. Let’s see how Paul helps us understand this further.”

### Into the Word

Ask someone with dramatic skills to read aloud [Romans 2:17-29](#). Each phrase of [verses 17-20](#) should be read as if it were an accolade being conferred; [verses 21-25](#) should be read with an accusatory tone; [verses 26-29](#) should be read with a matter-of-fact tone.

Working through [verses 17-23](#), ask learners to identify words or phrases that deal with “the inward” as distinct from those that deal with “the outward.” Jot observations on the board in two columns with those labels. Discuss how the inward and outward interrelate (or should interrelate). Use the commentary to explain words and phrases as necessary. At appropriate points, ask learners how they might react if they were first-century Jewish Christians reading these words of a fellow Jew.

When you reach [verse 24](#), say, “Paul concludes his rebuke by quoting the prophet Isaiah to remind his readers of Jewish background that their wrong attitudes and actions were nothing new.” Read [verse 24](#), then ask, “In what ways would a first-century Jewish Christian find Paul’s statement here easy to agree with?” After responses, ask, “How about difficult to agree with, and why?” Follow up: “In what ways is the name of God blasphemed today because of the actions of Christians?”

Introduce discussion of [verses 25-29](#) by summarizing the background of circumcision as a covenant sign per [Genesis 17:1-14](#). Then form learners into groups and ask each to create a three- or four-sentence summary of Paul’s argument in [Romans 2:25-29](#), focusing on the distinction between *knowing* the law and *obeying* it. As groups share summaries in the ensuing whole-class discussion, ask for New Testament examples of those who did not have the law, yet obeyed it anyway.

Make a transition by asking, “In what ways are Christians in danger of—or actually guilty of—elevating the outward over the inward, the letter of the law over its spirit?” Encourage free discussion.

*Option.* Distribute copies of the “The Laws of God” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Work through the exercise as a class, comparing results with today’s text.

### Into Life

Give each learner a handout on which you have reproduced the two great commandments of [Matthew 22:37-39](#). Ask for two minutes of silence for learners to reflect on and write down their thoughts, words, and actions that failed to live up to the spirit of these two commandments in the past week.

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “Circumcision of the Heart” activity from the reproducible page. Read aloud the passages indicated, discussing as appropriate. Allow time for learners to complete the three steps individually. Encourage learners to use the completed exercise or the above reflection activity for daily review this week.