

Inward and Outward

Devotional Reading: [Ezekiel 36:25–30](#)

Background Scripture: [Romans 2:1–29](#)

[Romans 2:12–24, 28–29](#)

¹² All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³ For 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. ¹⁴ (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵ They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.) ¹⁶ This will take place on the day when God judges people’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

¹⁷ Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; ¹⁸ if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; ¹⁹ if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—²¹ you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? ²² You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? ²⁴ As it is written: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”

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

Key Text

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.—[Romans 2:29](#)

God’s Law Is Love

Unit 2: Faith Triumphs, Law Fails

Lessons 5–9

Lesson Aims

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

1. Restate what makes a person “a Jew.”
2. Explain the importance of circumcision of the heart.
3. Make a plan to ensure that his or her actions serve as teaching examples.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Heart Surgery
- B. Lesson Context

I. Just Judgment (Romans 2:12–16)

- A. With or Without the Law? (v. 12)
- B. Hearers or Doers? (vv. 13–15)
Categorize Yourself?
- C. Secret or Public Violators? (v. 16)

II. False Faithfulness (Romans 2:17–24)

- A. Boastful Credentials (vv. 17–20)
To See Ourselves as Others See Us
- B. Blasphemous Hypocrisy (vv. 21–24)

III. True Identity (Romans 2:28–29)

- A. Outward Appearances (v. 28)
- B. Inner Convictions (v. 29)

Conclusion

- A. Circumcised Heart
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Amenhotep	Uh-men- <i>ho</i> -tep.
Claudius	<i>Claw</i> -dee-us.
Gamaliel	Guh- <i>may</i> -lih-ul or Guh- <i>may</i> -lee-al.
Maccabean	Mack-uh- <i>be</i> -un.
omniscient	ahm- <i>nish</i> -unt.

Pentateuch *Pen-ta-teuk*.

xenographic *zee-nuh-graf-ik*.

Introduction

A. Heart Surgery

A dear woman in a church where I ministered went into the hospital for heart surgery. When I made a post-surgical visit, I was surprised when her husband told me the surgeon had replaced a defective valve in her heart with a valve from a pig’s heart. This use of a “porcine valve” in a human heart has now been practiced for over thirty years. It is known as “receiving xenographic tissue,” meaning from a non-human source.

Once rare and dangerous, various types of heart surgery are now common. Included are “minimally invasive” or “keyhole” procedures, where small incisions are made and repairs involve tiny cameras and robot-assisted tools. The ultimate heart surgery is the heart transplant.

In Paul’s day, the necessity of the heart for human survival was recognized, but surgical repairs to a heart were unknown. It is ironic, then, that Paul unknowingly anticipated some of the wonders of modern medicine when he wrote of a spiritual heart surgery, what he calls the “circumcision of the heart.” This lesson explores what Paul means by this curious choice of words.

B. Lesson Context

Paul wrote the letter to the church in Rome in about AD 58, near the end of his third missionary journey. He had not visited Rome but hoped to do so in the near future ([Romans 1:10](#)). Despite this lack of firsthand familiarity, Paul was quite knowledgeable about issues causing dissention in the church of Rome. Conflict between Christians of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds was one of these issues. This may have been sharpened by the expulsion of all Jews from the city through an edict issued by Emperor Claudius in AD 49 (see [Acts 18:2](#)).

By the time Paul wrote, Claudius was dead, and Jews had returned to Rome. They included Jewish Christians. Gentile Christians had necessarily assumed leading roles in the church at Rome while the Jewish Christians were gone. We speculate that Paul knew that some of the returnees had attempted to assert their previous authority. In so doing, they may have elevated Jewish Christians above Gentile Christians. Circumcision, a sign of the old covenant, may have become a flash point in this conflict.

For the Hebrew people, circumcision began with Abraham ([Genesis 17](#)) as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham. That was in about 2000 BC. About 550 years later, circumcision of male babies was established (codified) to occur when the baby was eight days old ([Leviticus 12:3](#)). This tradition began with Abraham and his son Isaac ([Genesis 21:4](#)). The God-given instructions to Abraham seem to have presumed that the man knew what circumcision was, thus implying that circumcision was practiced by others before him. The antiquity of circumcision outside of Judaism was confirmed in 2021 when scientists “digitally unwrapped” the intact mummy of Pharaoh Amenhotep I (reigned about 1525–1504 BC), discovering that he had been circumcised.

In Paul's day of the first century AD, neither the Romans nor the Greeks practiced circumcision. Greeks viewed circumcision as an intentional marring or mutilation of the ideal body. Prohibition of the practice had been a notable factor in the Maccabean Revolt, which began in 167 BC (see the non-biblical [1 Maccabees 1:60–61; 2:45–46; 2 Maccabees 6:7–10](#)). Paul addressed the implications of the circumcision issue at length in the book of Galatians. But he also did so in [Romans 2](#)—today's lesson.

I. Just Judgment ([Romans 2:12–16](#))

A. With or Without the Law? (v. 12)

12. All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law.

A way to express the distinction between Jews and Gentiles in Paul's day was to say that Jews were *under the law* while Gentiles were *apart from the law*. The law that Paul had in mind was given by God through Moses for the nation of Israel: the Law of Moses. The first five books of the Old Testament, often called the Pentateuch, embody this law.

The Jews knew their law well. It was the basis for their faith, having been studied and practiced for centuries. Yet they had knowingly broken that law, and they could not avoid being *judged* according to those violations.

The Gentiles, for their part, had not been given this special revelation of law from God. Even so, [Romans 1:18–21](#) establishes that Gentiles could not escape judgment by pleading ignorance.

What Do You Think?

Knowing that the Old Testament law cannot bring salvation, what value can Christians experience from studying it?

Digging Deeper

Does your answer change when you expand the question to include the entire Old Testament? Why or why not?

B. Hearers or Doers? (vv. 13–15)

13. For 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.

For this verse and the next two, Paul breaks the flow of his argument to give an aside. In so doing, he adds background to his criticism of Jews who boasted of their possession of the law. Faithful keeping of the law was more than merely having and being acquainted with it, which would amount to being nothing more than *those who hear the law*. Justification came from obeying *the law* (but see also [Romans 3:9–20](#)).

To understand what Paul means by being *declared righteous* is central to the book of Romans, where the underlying Greek verb occurs 15 times. In its noun form it occurs many more times than

that! These terms come from the legal arena—the world of courtrooms and laws. To be justified in this sense means to be free from penalty for breaking the law. The Bible sees the Lord as the always-righteous judge and humans as always-unrighteous and guilty of sin, thereby incurring the wrath of God ([Romans 2:8](#); [3:23](#)). We are declared righteous because Christ has paid the penalty for our sin ([3:21–26](#); [4:25](#); [5:18](#)).

14. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law.

The other side of the coin is the situation where a Gentile (a non-Jewish person) who is ignorant of the Law of Moses behaves in accordance with its precepts nonetheless. For example, if a Gentile believed strongly that adultery was a bad thing and lived faithfully in a monogamous marriage, he or she would unwittingly be keeping the commandment “you shall not commit adultery” ([Exodus 20:14](#)).

In so doing, *Gentiles* are keeping the Law of Moses by nature. God’s *law* as given to the nation of Israel was not the imposition of unnatural, unreasonable, or unnecessary requirements for living. Rather, God’s laws gave instructions for living according to his created plan. Sin has distorted and thwarted this divine blueprint for holy living.

Categorize Yourself?

I heard a flight attendant voice the following during the COVID-19 pandemic:

You must wear a mask while on this flight, covering both your nose and mouth. If you do not intend to do this, please let us know now so that we can remove you from the plane. You will be free to make other arrangements to reach your destination. But be forewarned: you will not be allowed on any commercial airline in this country.

Such a stern warning resulted from insults and even assaults on flight attendants by opponents of mandatory masking. Rather than obey government rules on health and safety, some people believed that their personal rights allowed them to make their own rules.

Jews in Paul’s days prided themselves for having a comprehensive set of rules (laws) that guided behavior. They believed that keeping these rules made them righteous and better than the Gentiles who did not have Jewish law. Yet Paul affirmed that neither Jews with the Law of Moses nor the Gentiles without that law were truly righteous. All were sinners, even if they denied it.

What category are you in? Are you a proud rule-breaker, one who believes in personal sovereignty? If so, read [Romans 11:17–21](#); [13:1–5](#). Or are you one who keeps the rules and feels smugly superior in that regard? If so, read [Romans 3:9–20](#) and [James 2:10](#). Do you sincerely believe that neither group is righteous apart from faith in Jesus Christ?

—M. S. K.

15. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.)

This verse is sometimes seen as opening the door for the possibility of a Gentile achieving a state of

righteousness without knowing the Law of Moses as Paul introduces the concept of *conscience*. Paul uses some form of this word 21 times in his epistles. Sometimes this word implies “to know” or “to be aware of” something (examples: [Acts 23:1](#); [1 Corinthians 4:4](#)); at other times, it refers to moral sensitivity. The latter is the meaning here. Even without having the Law of Moses, everyone has a built-in sense of right and wrong—a moral compass. But this guide can be suppressed ([1 Timothy 4:2](#); [Titus 1:15–16](#)). And indeed it has been suppressed (compare [Romans 1:18](#)).

What Do You Think?

What role does conscience play in following the Spirit’s leading?

Digging Deeper

How do you guard against a “seared” conscience that follows deceptive teaching ([1 Timothy 4:1–2](#))?

C. Secret or Public Violators? (v. 16)

16. This will take place on the day when God judges people’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

Both Jews with the Law of Moses and Gentiles with the law written on their hearts will stand as guilty *on the day when God judges people’s secrets*. People may get away with hidden acts of sin under human judicial systems, but that is not so with God (also [1 Corinthians 4:5](#)). The function of eternal judgment is entrusted to the Son, *Jesus Christ* ([John 5:22](#); [9:39](#); [Acts 17:31](#); [2 Corinthians 5:10](#)). God knows what we believe to be hidden ([Psalm 139:1–3](#); [Matthew 6:4](#)). He is the omniscient (all-knowing) judge who never lacks evidence.

The phrase *my gospel* used here and other places ([Romans 16:25](#); [2 Timothy 2:8](#)) shows a personal attachment between Paul and the message of Christ. Paul had been taught the gospel message by none other than Jesus Christ himself ([Galatians 1:11–12](#)).

II. False Faithfulness ([Romans 2:17–24](#))

A. Boastful Credentials (vv. 17–20)

17–18. Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law;

Paul turned his attention to readers of Jewish background. His propositions that begin in this verse are of the conditional “if ... then” type. Such arguments feature one or more hypotheses (if-statements) followed by a logical conclusion.

The hypotheses take the form of what we might call a “résumé of righteousness”—a listing of things the Christians of Jewish background might smugly cite as evidence of their superiority to Christians of Gentile background. The Jews of Paul’s day claimed to know the divine plan and desires of the Creator. They were confident that the law expressed God’s enduring pattern for life in all aspects. These standards were seen as timeless and absolute.

19–20. 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 little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—

Before reaching the conclusion of the argument, Paul adds more hypotheses. These two verses describe the ancient Jewish attitude toward Gentiles. As *a guide for the blind*, the Jew had spiritual insights that the Gentile lacked (see [Isaiah 35:5](#)). Combined with the image of being *a light for those who are in the dark*, the situation describes spiritual blindness—the Gentile inability to know and follow God’s will fully (compare and contrast [Isaiah 9:1–2](#) [quoted in [Matthew 4:15–16](#)]; [Isaiah 42:6](#) and [49:6](#) [in [Luke 2:32](#) and [Acts 13:47](#)]). The Jews living by God’s law were to be a model of righteousness that condemned sin ([Isaiah 51:4](#)) while drawing people to God and his glory ([60:3](#)). Consequently, Jews believed themselves to be instructors and teachers in that regard.

What Do You Think?

In what circumstances are you a teacher?

Digging Deeper

How can you remain confident that what you do and say are teaching the same lesson to your “students”?

To See Ourselves as Others See Us

Denial and unawareness are part of the very definition of spiritual blindness. That’s because if the one who was spiritually blind could and would admit to it, then he or she would correct the situation and wouldn’t be spiritually blind!

At one time, Paul needed to be struck physically blind in order to have his spiritual blindness corrected ([Acts 9:1–22](#)). That correction qualified him to recognize spiritual blindness in his fellow Jews who saw themselves as spiritual guides yet suffered from spiritual blindness themselves. They had become as the blind guides whom Jesus described in [Matthew 15:14; 23:16–24](#).

Many people today suffer from spiritual blindness, unable to see Jesus for who he really is. They need our help! But that help won’t be effective unless we first correct our own areas of spiritual blindness. And *that* correction won’t happen until a spiritually mature person makes us aware of our deficiencies in this regard. Whom will you invite to be your spiritual mentor?

—R. L. N.

B. Blasphemous Hypocrisy (vv. 21–24)

21a. you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself?

Paul moves from if-statements to his concluding then-statements. These surely reflect the actual situation within the Roman church, where Christians of Jewish background had regained positions of leadership and teaching, lording over those of Gentile background. Paul’s solution is to begin by questioning the consistency and sincerity of the teachers. Failure in this area results in being

hypocrites—a condemnation on the lips of Jesus more than a dozen times in the Gospel of Matthew (see especially chapter 23).

21b–22. 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?

Paul now dives deeper, into the very heart of the law itself as he refers to behavior forbidden by the eighth, seventh, and first (and/or second) commandments, respectively (Exodus 20:3–4, 14–15; Deuteronomy 5:7–8, 18–19). Since Paul had never visited the church in Rome (see Lesson Context), it is unlikely that he knew of specific violations of Jewish law by these teachers. But we should remember Paul’s background: he had been a student of the renown Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), and Paul had been raised as a Pharisee, a sect with fanatical devotion to strict interpretation and observance of the commandments (23:6; 26:5; Philippians 3:5). As an “insider,” he had surely seen famous teachers whose private lives did not live up to their teaching.

Even if that was not the case among the Christians of Jewish background in Rome, the warning itself was valid. It was all too easy to skirt the commandments by rationalizing (see Mark 7:9–13).

The Greek word translated *rob temples* is difficult; this is the only place in the New Testament where it appears. The Greek word does appear in the nonbiblical 2 Maccabees 9:2, where it also refers to robbing the temple. One theory is that Paul was referring to the possibility that some of his Jewish readers had sullied themselves by dishonorable contact with pagan temples, perhaps by shady business dealings with pagan priests.

23–24. You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”

The squeaky-clean moral image the Jews wished to project to the Gentile world was filled with hypocrisy (again, Matthew 23). Their pride in the Law of Moses was dishonored by their failure to keep that law. The Jews through their hypocritical behavior among the Gentiles were dishonoring the name of God. This was not a new problem in the first century AD, given that the phrase *as it is written* likely refers to the same problem of blasphemy in Isaiah 52:5 and Ezekiel 36:20–22. For *God’s name* to be *blasphemed* by pagans is bad enough; how much worse it was when such blasphemy came about *among the Gentiles* through God’s covenant people of the Old Testament era! Paul did not countenance any sort of “Do as I say, not as I do” behavior (1 Timothy 3:7; etc.).

What Do You Think?

When you consider the state of the world, what would you consider to be the greatest sin problem “out there”?

Digging Deeper

How do you avoid the hypocrisy of contributing to this sin by your action or inaction (James 4:17)?

III. True Identity (Romans 2:28–29)

A. Outward Appearances (v. 28)

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

Paul began this section by appealing to those who proudly call themselves Jews ([Romans 2:17](#)). He now defines what a Jew is *not* in the ideal sense. Jewish identity is neither an issue of *outward* appearance in general nor the covenant sign of *physical* circumcision (or lack of it) in particular. Those are mere considerations of the flesh.

B. Inner Convictions (v. 29)

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.

Being a Jew in the ideal sense is an issue of *the heart, by the Spirit*, not that of the flesh, which focuses on *the written code* of the Law of Moses. Therefore being a Jew in this sense is neither a matter of biological ancestry nor of adherence to the Law of Moses. In offering this proposition, Paul lifts the discussion above physical realities to that of spiritual realities. But that wasn't really anything new! God had always desired circumcision of the heart ([Deuteronomy 10:16](#); [30:6](#); [Jeremiah 4:4](#)). To have a circumcised heart was to relinquish stubborn disobedience and be free to love God without limits. For Christians, it is to say with Jesus, "Not my will, but yours be done" ([Luke 22:42](#)).

Truly following God is a matter of the heart, the inner being, not a surgical procedure on the physical body. Demands for strict, even slavish adherence to the Law of Moses may have elicited praise from men and women, but not necessarily the approval of God ([Matthew 23:23–24](#); etc.). God knows our hearts, and he knows both Jews and Gentiles are sinners without excuse.

Many places in the Bible teach us that God looks upon our hearts (example: [Psalm 44:21](#)) and sees us as we truly are. Indeed, the Lord made David the King of Israel because God knew what was in David's heart ([1 Samuel 16:7](#); [Acts 13:22](#)). Paul elsewhere drew on this idea of spiritual circumcision to identify the new people of God ([Philippians 3:3](#); [Colossians 2:11–12](#)). Physical circumcision or uncircumcision is ultimately a nonissue; it's spiritual circumcision that accompanies faith in Christ that matters ([Galatians 5:6](#)).

What Do You Think?

What habits reveal the earnest conviction of your heart?

Digging Deeper

What habit would you like to break or develop to live in a way that reinforces your desire for God's praise over people's?

Conclusion

A. Circumcised Heart

The idea of the circumcised heart was powerful for Moses and Paul, and must be for us today. Can

we humble ourselves and leave behind our tendencies to be stiff-necked? Can we trust fully in Christ for our salvation, not our own good works?



Visual for [Lesson 5](#). Allow learners one minute of silent reflection on this question before considering the questions associated with [verse 29](#).

Paul's exposition for the rest of the book of Romans required both Jews and Gentiles realize their need for God's salvation because all are under the power of sin ([Romans 3:9](#)). For both groups, hope comes not from keeping the law, whether it be the law of the conscience or the Law of Moses. It comes from faith in Christ.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, may our hearts turn away from pride and sin and toward you in faith and hope. May our trust be only in your Son, Jesus. We pray in his name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God wants a humble, obedient heart.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the [NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition](#)).

Into the Lesson

Write on the board *Good Living* as a heading. Divide learners into pairs. Invite pairs to each share an example of a living family member, friend, or acquaintance who is not a follower of Jesus yet whose life shows good moral qualities. Ask pairs to answer: How does this person act in ways that are compatible with Christian morality?

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Right and Wrong Around the World” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Students can work in pairs to complete as indicated.

Following either activity, gather the pairs together. As a whole group discuss what the world might conclude from the fact that people from various religious faiths or no faith at all seem to live generally moral lives. What might society say when those people appear more righteous than Christians?

Segue by saying, “Even though some people seem good, Paul teaches that being good just isn’t good enough. Let’s see what the lesson teaches, not just about other people, but about ourselves too.”

Into the Word

Invite volunteers to read [Romans 2:12–24, 28–29](#) aloud. As a group, create a list on the board of what Paul teaches about judging others. Include references from Romans and Paul’s other letters. Do not erase the list, as it will be referred to in the Into Life section. (*Option.* Create a separate header for biblical teachings on or examples of judgment that are not found in Paul’s writings.)

Use the list to help discuss: 1—why judgment should be left to God; and 2—why it was problematic for Paul’s audience that their actions differed from what was required by God’s law.

Ask a volunteer to reread [Romans 2:29](#) aloud. Divide the class into small groups to talk about what Paul means by “circumcision of the heart.” Distribute a handout (you create) with the following questions: 1—What did circumcision in the Old Testament symbolize? 2—Does circumcision of the heart differ from God’s intention for circumcision in Israel? Why or why not? Share information from the commentary to help answer questions brought up in the discussions.

Into Life

Considering the list created in Into the Word, discuss as a class 1—What problems that Paul

pointed out among the early Christians that are also problems among Christians today; and 2—What difference circumcision of the heart makes in showing God’s love to others.

Divide the class in half for a debate on the resolution: *Do as I say, not as I do*. Allow time for the groups to formulate an opening statement, as many arguments as possible in favor of their position, and a concluding statement. Encourage these groups to include biblical examples of why it is or is not appropriate to ask others to do as you say, not as you do. Close the debate by talking together about which stance is in keeping with Paul’s teaching and what nuance, if any, the other side of the conversation has to offer. Then give learners one minute to individually make a plan that ensures his or her actions serve as teaching examples, demonstrating integrity between what is said and what is done.

Option. Distribute copies of the “Repaired with Gold” exercise from the activity page. Have learners complete it individually in a minute or less before sharing with a partner.

Conclude the lesson with a prayer that learners would have open hearts that lead their actions throughout the week. Encourage them to watch for opportunities to teach in both word and deed and come to class next week prepared to report on their experiences.