

RITUALS, RELIGION, AND TRANSFORMED HEARTS
ROMANS 2:25-29

A few months ago a sealed leather trunk that had been stored in a museum in the Netherlands was opened and what the researchers found was astounding — 2600 undelivered letters, perfectly preserved from the 17th century. About 600 of those letters were never opened; so now — 400 years after they were written — they will be read for the first time using x-ray scanning technology that will allow the researchers to protect the integrity of the letters.

Because many of the letters were already open, they have been re-read and are being catalogued. The letters are a cross-section of European culture of that day, as one researcher noted: “Many of the writers and intended recipients of these letters were people who travelled throughout Europe, such as wandering musicians and religious exiles. The trunk preserves letters from many social classes, and women as well as men.”

One of the letters reportedly reveals the plight of a Dutch opera singer who had left the Netherlands for Paris and learned she was pregnant. She apparently had implored a wealthy merchant friend to write to the father of the child.

The letter reads: “You can divine without difficulty the true cause of her despair. I cannot put it into so many words; what I ought to say to you is so excessive. Content yourself with thinking on it, and returning her to life by procuring her return.”

The letter is marked “*niet hebben*”, meaning the man refused to accept the letter (and perhaps the pregnancy). Thus, the fate of the singer and her child remains unknown—like the fates of so many of the letter writers, as the notes never found their destinations, sealed in the trunk for centuries...

In 1702 a man wrote to warn his musician brother to not try to come through Paris while travelling in France as musicians had been conscripted into the army there. He wrote: “If you come here, do not bring your instrument or anything else.” [Accessed from [Ancient Origins](#), 6/10/16.]

Talk about miscommunication — messages that were missed by 400 years. You have to wonder how many lives were negatively impacted by those missed letters — lives lost, sins unreconciled, love unreturned, misunderstandings unclarified, and opportunities missed.

We might be tempted to say that those missed messages were sorrowful and tragic. But there is another message that is far more tragic when it is missed. And it is the message of the gospel. If people misunderstand the gospel and its purpose, they will not only have regrets on earth, but they will have regrets for all of eternity. That is why we want to be so very clear about the gospel.

And that's why Paul was so clear about the gospel when he wrote the church in Rome. Because he'd never been to Rome, this was a church that did not personally know him. But Paul wants to establish a base for his ministry as he takes the gospel westward to places like Spain, and he writes this letter to ask the Romans to consider being that base. But because they don't know him, he sets out his understanding of the gospel and theology; and he begins his letter with an explanation of the sinfulness of men:

- ✓ The unrighteous heathen are sinners (1:18-32)
- ✓ The "righteous" Jew is a sinner (2:1-29)
- ✓ All men everywhere are sinners (3:1-20)

The shocking part of this section is chapter two — how could those who had all the religious heritage and pedigree of Judaism be unrighteous? They are Jews; they have the Law of God; they are in the covenant of Abraham; they are circumcised. How could they be sinners under the condemnation of God?

Paul's explanation is quite simple in this morning's passage (2:25-29):

PERSONAL RITUALS AND RELIGIOUS HERITAGE ARE UTTERLY WORTHLESS TO PRODUCE SALVATION.

In this passage, Paul addresses the Jew's (remember he is writing this as a diatribe against one representative Jew who thinks he is righteous) misconception about the value of his heritage and his so-called righteousness. As he corrects that incorrect thinking, Paul addresses four different misconceptions about salvation and the gospel:

Misconception #1: Salvation is About Who You ARE (v. 25a)

- ✓ What circumcision is
- ✓ Circumcision *is* valuable

Misconception #2: Salvation is About What You DO (vv. 25b-27)

- ✓ Breaking God's Law leads to CONDEMNATION (v. 25b)
- ✓ Obeying God's Law reveals God's GIFT of salvation (vv. 26-27)

Misconception #3: Salvation is MAN-Produced (v. 28-29a)

Misconception #4: Salvation is MAN-Honoring (v. 29b)

Misconception #1: Salvation is About Who You ARE (v. 25a)

- The Jew that Paul was addressing in this chapter is representative of the typical thinking of the Jew in that day. What most Jews thought was that they were righteous by virtue of their connection to Abraham — a connection that is indicated by the act of circumcision (John 8:33, 39; Acts 15:1). The supposition is something like this, “because of my spiritual heritage, I am acceptable to God...” These believe in a salvation by heritage — be born into the right family and God looks favorably on you. Is that really true? To answer that, we need to understand what circumcision is —
- **What circumcision is**
 - ✓ The physical reality: circumcision was enacted for the Jewish people in **Genesis 17:9-14**. On the eighth day after his birth, every male was to have the foreskin of his reproductive organ removed.
 - ✓ The spiritual significance:
 - Circumcision was a sign of the Abrahamic covenant — it was a physical mark that represented God’s promise to make a nation for Himself (and that’s what makes it different from baptism — circumcision represents a coming promise; baptism represents a completed reality). Notice in vv. 4-8, 13-14 how often God uses the personal pronouns “I” and “My” to indicate that He is the one making and keeping the covenant; it is *God’s* promise to act for Abraham and his lineage.
 - Circumcision, as a sign, did not provide salvation for the individual (though it did point to the promise of the coming Messiah, through Abraham, who would provide salvation, 12:1-3).
 - Circumcision was a sign of the need for an inward transformation conforming to the outward action (Lev. 26:41; Dt. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 9:26; Ezk. 44:9; Rom. 2:28-29).
 - That circumcision was done on the male reproductive organ “was symbolic of the sinfulness of man that was passed from generation to generation. The very procreative organ needed to be cleansed of a covering. So man at the very center of his nature is sinful and needs cleansing of the heart. This graphic symbol of the need for removing sin became the sign of being a Jew.” [MacArthur, Romans 1-8, 159.] So, the symbol of circumcision, rather than being a symbol of pride, should have been a symbol of humility and repentance.
 - ✓ To summarize, circumcision was a rite and practice that was required of all Israelite men and indicated the promise God made with Abraham, but it was completely inadequate to save anyone.
 - In **Acts 15:10-11**, Peter clearly states that the ritual of circumcision could not save anyone (10) and that Jews are saved in the same way Gentiles are (for emphasis he says it that way and not that Gentiles are saved in the same way as Jews): by faith (11).
 - Paul says that if anyone is going to attempt to be saved by circumcision, they will have to keep the entire OT Law and they cannot appeal at all to Christ (**Gal. 5:1-4**).
 - So if circumcision was only a sign, then was it a wasted practice? No...

- Circumcision *is* valuable — how is it valuable?

- ✓ Notice that Paul says that circumcision is of **value** — it does have benefit and profit for the Jew. But Paul is also very specific about the value of circumcision: ***if you practice the Law***.
 - ✓ If circumcision led the Israelite to say, “I am in the promise God made to Abraham and I need to be obedient to the Law of God, even as Abraham and all righteous Jews are,” then there was value in his circumcision. If circumcision made him humble and obedient to God, it was valuable.
 - ✓ Circumcision should have led every Israelite to obedience to God. So circumcision’s value was:
 - It led Israelites to remember the promise of God to save His people.
 - It led Israelites to obedience to God (Dt. 10:16; 1 Cor. 7:19)
 - ✓ This is not to say that the Jew could perfectly keep the Law; he could not. But the Law could lead him to faith in God who would provide the Messiah who would save him. And that faith would produce obedience to God (e.g., Gen. 15:6; Lk. 1:6).
- So the Jew said, “Salvation is about who I am, and I am circumcised into God’s covenant with Abraham; because of that, I’m saved and secure. My heritage has saved me.” And Paul says, “No, your heritage has no value to you, if that is all you are depending on for your salvation. You are dead in your sins.” God accepts no one — Jew or Gentile — on the basis of his lineage.

Misconception #2: Salvation is About What You Do (vv. 25b-27)

- Breaking God’s Law leads to **CONDEMNATION** (v. 25b)

- ✓ The Jew said that he *could* keep the Law of God (Mt. 6:1, 5; 12:2, 10; 23:28a).
- ✓ But as Jesus demonstrated repeatedly with the Pharisees, to keep the Law meant that every single aspect of the Law had to be kept, including the *intent* of the Law (Mt. 6:21-22ff; 7:23; 23:23-24, 27-29). Because of this, no man could hope to keep the Law (Mt. 6:48; Gal. 5:1-4).
- ✓ And Paul says that when someone supposes that he can keep the Law but he cannot, he is a **transgressor of the Law** — and that was as if he was **uncircumcised**. These are stunning words.
 - To be a transgressor is to step across the line of God’s truth — the sinner has chosen to intentionally disobey the commands of God. He is legally guilty and culpable. The Jew considered himself circumcised (and righteous), *not* a transgressor. Sin was for the Gentiles; they were the outcasts, not him.
 - And if he is a transgressor (and all are), then he is **uncircumcision**. This is completely foreign to the Jew. Rabbinical teaching repeatedly said that circumcised Jews could not be condemned:
 - ... “Circumcised men do not descend into Gehenna.”
 - ... “At the last Abraham will sit at the entrance into Gehenna and will not let any circumcised man of Israel go down there.”
 - ... Circumcision will deliver Israel from Gehenna.”
 - The Jew thought he could keep the Law (2:17ff); he could not, and that left him condemned.

- Obeying God's Law reveals God's GIFT of salvation (vv. 26-27)

- ✓ Paul will demonstrate in another way in vv. 26-27 that salvation is not about what we do.
- ✓ The Jews in v. 25 did not keep the Law, but in vv. 26-27, Paul talks about the **uncircumcised man** (Gentile, outside the covenant of Abraham) who **keeps the requirements of the Law**.
- ✓ There are two indications that Paul wants us to think that this obedience is possible:
 - When Paul says, **if the uncircumcised man...** he doesn't mean with **if** that he *will* be obedient, but he does mean that it is possible to obey and that some will.
 - When Paul asks **will not his uncircumcision...** he expects an affirmative answer, "yes."
 - So there will be some who obey and when they do, it will be like the life that a circumcised Israelite should have lived.
- ✓ This does not mean that they have been saved by their works. It is like v. 7 — when those who do good and live for God's glory and honor and live for things that are immortal, it reveals that they have been redeemed by God. When (v. 26) men begin to obey the Word of God and live for Him, it reveals that they have been saved by Him — the Spirit of God has changed them (e.g., 8:13-14).

"The ultimate sign, the [genuine] evidence, of membership of the covenant of God is neither circumcision nor possession of the law, but the obedience which both circumcision and the law demand. Their circumcision did not make them what their disobedience proved they were not. This is not salvation by obedience, but obedience as the evidence of salvation." [Stott, *The Message of Romans*]

- ✓ And notice the result of the obedience of this Gentile —
 - **he keeps the Law** — the word "keep" in v. 27 is different from v. 26 — it means "he fulfills." He not only obeys (v. 26) the Law, but he brings the Law to its completion and fulfillment; that doesn't mean that he fulfills it the way that Christ did, but it does mean that he does what the law intended him to do. Paul would say that this is the one who lives by faith (1:17), which is always what the Law was intended to do (cf. 1:5; 16:19).
 - And because he keeps the Law, Paul also says in v. 27 that he **will judge** the Jew. That is, the obedience of the Gentile will be a testimony against the Jew who thinks he is righteous. The Gentile's obedience will serve to condemn the self-righteous Jew.
- ✓ At the end of v. 27, this obedient Gentile is contrasted with the unrighteous Jew — the Gentile is obedient to God, while the Jew has **the letter of the Law** — he has the written word and he has obeyed the rituals externally while missing the intent of the Law. Again, he is a **transgressor**.
- ✓ So, put verses 26-27 together and what Paul is saying is that when a Gentile obeys the commands of God as a result of his faith in God and Christ, then it is evidence of his salvation; when a Jew refuses to submit himself to God in obedience to the Law, it is evidence of his lack of salvation.
- ✓ Salvation is not about what you do — it is about what God does to save you so that you can obey Him — and that takes us to Paul's next misconception about the gospel...

Misconception #3: Salvation is MAN-Produced (v. 28-29a)

- The Jew that Paul is writing against is the one who thinks that all his external obedience to the Law is sufficient to save him — he is like the Pharisee who thought that if he was scrupulous enough to tithe off his harvest of herbs in his garden (Mt. 23:23) that he was certainly righteous.
- But Paul clearly says that Jewishness (and salvation) is not about what one is **outwardly**. And it's not about **circumcision...which is outward in the flesh**.
 - ✓ In other words, a physical act cannot effect a spiritual change. A little cut in an 8-day old boy can't transform him from a sinner into a righteous man.
 - ✓ Circumcision is man-produced; and no act of man can change the spiritual heart of a man.
 - ✓ When Paul says that a **Jew is one inwardly** he means that there is an internal conformity to the outward action and life. He has not merely had the sign made on his body; he is genuinely and internally righteous.
 - ✓ The Jew lived to display his "spirituality" publically and outwardly (**Mt. 15:8**); Paul makes it clear that the only spirituality that matters is what God sees in the internal heart of the man.
- Notice the two characteristics of this "inward Jew:"
 - ✓ His **circumcision is of the heart**. Even in the OT, circumcision was never about just the physical act. The physical act was always to denote an internal transformation:

- *Lev. 26:41 I also was acting with hostility against them, to bring them into the land of their enemies — or if their uncircumcised heart becomes humbled so that they then make amends for their iniquity,*
- *Dt. 10:16 "So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer."*
- *Dt. 30:6 "Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live."*
- *Jer. 4:4 "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD And remove the foreskins of your heart, Men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, Or else My wrath will go forth like fire And burn with none to quench it, Because of the evil of your deeds."*
- *Jer. 9:26 ... and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised of heart."*
- *Ezek. 44:9 Thus says the Lord GOD, "No foreigner uncircumcised in heart and uncircumcised in flesh, of all the foreigners who are among the sons of Israel, shall enter My sanctuary."*

Salvation has never been about doing some act for God and being considered good. Salvation has always been about being changed by God from the inside out (Jer. 31:31). It's always about the heart.

- ✓ His circumcision is done **by the Spirit**. That is, the Spirit of God has worked to produce this man's salvation (which is another reason that I believe the physically uncircumcised man in vv. 26-27 is a genuine and obedient believer). Paul says in Eph. 2:11 that it's Spirit-made, not hand-made.

- Salvation is always and only the work of God to change a man; salvation can never be accomplished by man and always can only be done by God. You are never adequate to please God; Christ is always adequate to please God and provide your salvation.
- So Paul says in 7:6 that now we serve God by the Spirit, and not by the letter of the Law. We have been changed by the Spirit, nothing our external obedience to the Law could ever do.
- Salvation is not man-made; it is God-made. When man attempts to produce his own salvation, what he gets is this: Mt. 23:15-33. How will you escape the sentence of Hell? You cannot make your own salvation.
- But that doesn't mean you can't be saved. The Spirit *can* produce your salvation: Jn. 3:1-15.

Misconception #4: Salvation is MAN-Honoring (v. 29b)

- When a man attempts to make his own salvation, he gets the honor. Paul says ***his praise is from men***. Men praise him for his self-righteousness. And that was the practice of the Jews (2:17-20; Mt. 6:1-8).
- But that's not what true salvation does; when God saves a man through the Spirit of God, ***his praise...is from God***. That is, God honors him. God takes him into glory where he is allowed to see the face of His Savior and he is given all the blessings of Heaven.
 - ✓ There is also a play on words in this phrase. The word ***Jew*** is a derivative of the word "Judah." And "Judah" means, "praise" (e.g., Gen. 29:35; 49:8). So to be a Jew is to want the right kind of praise — the kind that originates in God.
 - ✓ In fact, this entire section is appropriately summarized by this last verse. Do you want to know the difference between a false understanding of salvation and true salvation?
 - True salvation is Spirit-produced; false salvation is works-produced.
 - True salvation draws praise from God and glory to God; false salvation draws praise from men and attributes glory to men.
 - True salvation is about what God can do; false salvation is what man attempts (and fails) to do.
- What is particularly tragic about these ungodly forms of self-righteousness and "self-salvation" is that they are so pervasive. Paul not only dealt with this issue in Romans 2, but the early church dealt with it in Acts 15; Paul's first letter dealt with it extensively (Gal. 2, 5, 6). And he also wrote about it to the Ephesians (2:11), Philippians (3:2-5), Colossians (2:11; 3:11; 4:11), and Corinthians (7:18-19). Much of his ministry was about protecting the gospel from those who thought they could be saved without God. And nothing appears to have changed in our day.

CONCLUSION:

It might appear to you that this sermon has been wholly disconnected from you and your life; you have never thought about circumcision and its relationship to salvation, and you certainly haven't ever claimed, "I'm a Christian because I've been circumcised."

But the principles behind the claims of the Jews are very much alive in the church today:

- ✓ People still believe that salvation is about who you are: "My dad/family..."
- ✓ People still believe that salvation is about what you do: "I go to church regularly," "I walked the aisle when I was 8-years-old," "I was baptized at 10," "I went to confirmation class..."
- ✓ People still believe that internal attitudes don't matter as long as we do the right thing; and as long as we do the right thing, we're saved.
- ✓ People still want to live for the applause of men more than of God.

My friend, if you believe in a salvation that belongs in any of those categories, then you are not saved. The only hope that any man has is that the Spirit of God blows in his life and changes him from the inside out. You are not good without God; without Christ, you cannot do anything to please God.

Salvation means to be saved from our sin —

- ✓ We are saved from the wrath of God against our sin. We are no longer God's enemies.
- ✓ We are saved from the power of the flesh that leads us into sin. We don't have to sin any more.
- ✓ If you want to be God's friend and you want to live for God (and not for your selfish sin), then ask Him for forgiveness of sin and ask for His Spirit to change you into an obedient follower of Christ.
- ✓ And He will make your uncircumcision to be "circumcision."

BENEDICTION: Romans 15:13