

XIV. Romans in Biblical Perspective
The Gospel of God
“Religion Will Not Save on Judgment Day – Part 2”
Romans 2:17–29
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Our text for this study will be from Romans 2:17–24 but I will start out reading what we covered in the last study. Romans 2:17–24 says [17] *But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God [18] and know His will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; [19] and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, [20] an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— [21] you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? [22] You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? [23] You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. [24] For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”* The grass withers, the flower fades, God’s Word abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

In Romans 2:25–29 Paul is bringing up something for us to consider and properly apply that is a little bit of a challenge. This makes me think of something that was said to me when I was growing up. Whenever I was facing something difficult my dad had a very interesting statement he would make to me. He would say, ‘Ok son, it’s time to put your big boy pants on.’ I knew exactly what he was talking about when he said it. So I’m going to say this to you. Those who are reading this today, we are dealing with a subject that you need to put your ‘preacher big boy’ pants on because this subject is a challenge but it is unbelievably profitable. I’ll do my best to lay it out for you but I want you to dig in with me because it’s crucial of what we understand from the text. I’m going to put it into context as we go through it.

The Apostle Paul has been wanting to come to Rome but he can’t because God is leading him elsewhere. He is currently on his way to Jerusalem where he will be arrested and taken to Caesarea by the Sea for a two-year imprisonment, then he will finally get to Rome as a prisoner. Because God has said ‘no’ to his repeated requesting to go to Rome he is now going to write to the Romans about this Gospel. So, he develops this epistle to them of the Gospel of God which we know because he says this three times in Romans 1. Then he gives us lays out a crucial, earthshaking profile of the Gospel in Romans 1:16–17 which says [16] *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. [17] For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”*

After giving us this brief profile of the Gospel, which is the grace of God revealed from heaven, he immediately turns to the wrath of God that is revealed from heaven temporarily and in measure now, with the warning of the Judgment Seat where the wrath of God will be given without measure and for eternity. We tend to look at this focus on the Judgment as a way of setting up the majesty of God and actually Paul is not doing that. In Romans 2 he declares to us the judgment where God renders to every man according to his works according to the Gospel. In other words, the doctrine for the Judgment is not the setup doctrine for the Gospel, it is the foundational precept that the Gospel is built upon and seen as Good News.

I know we've already spent a lot of time on the Judgment but we won't get out of it until he sums it up in Romans 3:23 which says *[23] for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*. Paul is taking time on the Judgment Seat for two reasons. Number one he wants to give you an appreciate of why the power of God, the righteousness of God and the Gospel is Good News. He is doing this by showing us that everyone of us is born under an indictment. We have a bad heart – we have a bad record. We have a sinful heart – we have a bad heart with a sin record. We are all born under the judgment of God, helpless and hopeless. So I'm glad that there is now a message of the power of God because I don't have the power to save myself, no one else can save me and neither can religion, for only Christ has the power to save me.

No one gets a pass because of their ethnicity and that's why Paul says to both Jew and Gentile. He takes on the Gentile first in Romans 1:18–32 saying they have plenty of information to know this Good News for they were created to live in creation which is the theater of God's glory with the surround sound of His glory which is seen day after day as God's speech pours forth from the heavens and the earth that He is glory. Even His eternal power and Divine nature are clearly seen through what has been made but the problem is we suppress the truth in unrighteousness and therefore we stand under God's judgment as pagan Gentiles. Paul also handles the moralist Gentile in Romans 2:1–6 to show how they stand under God's judgment as well. For as they moralize and bring judgment upon others, they play the hypocrite where they wear the mask of morality, but the reality is that in life they stand in rebellion against God, with all in need of the righteousness and power of God.

Then Paul turns to the Jew and points out they will come to the Judgment Seat as well. Will your true nature save you? We are all religious. The pagan makes religion out of irreligion. Then there is man-made false religion. This is where we were at in the last study and where we will be in this study. True religion cannot save you for none of these religions can save you. True religion has a purpose for the saved but it cannot save you. In this time who had received true religion by Divine revelation? It was the Jewish people in covenant with God for they were the only nation He has ever made covenant with. In the 39 books of the Old Testament He deposited to them the testimony of true religion as He included the moral law of God, the sacrifices and everything else that was put there. Paul is addressing the Jew who would put their hope in the true religion as he is telling them that that won't save them.

He does this by breaking this into three parts and we covered two in the last study. He gives us five of the privileges of true religion as he explains they cannot save you. There is the law of God, the will of God, the knowledge of God, a covenantal relationship with God, and a stewardship from God of what has been given to them. These privileges cannot save you. Now as you consider Christianity, you have a great privilege to have a Bible or more in your home. There were people who died for you to have the Bible in your own language, but the fact that you might have ten Bibles (more or less) is not going to save you. To attend a church that has the free practice of religion is a privilege along with a church that practices the means of grace, but attending that church does not save you. True religion also has ministries but only Christ can save you. Another privilege Paul points out is that you who were taught and received light can now teach others the light to those who are in darkness, but teaching the light to others isn't going to get you to heaven. Singing in the choir or serving in the nurse's office isn't going to get you to heaven. Those are privileges and ministries we can do as the saved and we can mature and mobilize Christianity through it, but they weren't designed to save you.

You are saved when the Gospel brings you to Jesus. I thank God that I can give away tracks that explain the Gospel but it's not going to get me to heaven. Only Christ saves sinners

and at the Judgment Seat the privileges of true religion will not get you into heaven. Jesus is the only Way, the Truth and the Life for no man can come to the Father but through Him (John 14:6). There is nothing wrong with true religion, what is wrong is if you are trusting it to do what it is not designed to do. True religion can mature and mobilize you but it can't save you. True religion by God's covenant design has an external sign and seal that His people are given.

You are saved through Christ in the covenant of grace and this grace unfolds in the Bible. We see it in Abraham, then Moses, then David and then steps to its glorious fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the Mediator that doesn't need a Savior. Jesus is the only Mediator who can be our Prophet, Priest and King. As this covenant is maturing in its revelation to you, God gives appropriate signs and seals of that covenant. In the Old Testament were circumcision and the Passover. In the old covenant the people were called the circumcision. Jews back then would have called Gentiles dogs and they would have said 'us, we're the circumcision for the external sign identifies us.' But those people in the circumcision may or may not be saved.

Now let's fast forward to the new covenant where circumcision has been superseded by baptism so in the new covenant people are to be baptized but they may or may not be saved. Yet you must be circumcised and baptized to be saved so hold on for I know some of you want to bring charges against me at this point. I want to use this text of Scripture to show you what I mean by this statement. Now Romans 2:17–24 gave us the five privileges of true religion that can't save you, it gave us the five ministries of true religion and then five questions to show us they can't save us for something has to happen to your heart, otherwise you blaspheme God instead of give glory to God.

Now Paul goes to a third aspect of true religion which is the external God given sign and seal which is circumcision. Romans 2:25–29 says *[25] For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. [26] So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? [27] Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. [28] For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. [29] But a Jew is one inwardly, and **circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.***

In other words, here the issue of circumcision is in the heart and your heart relationship to God through His Word and not the sign. It doesn't mean the sign isn't valuable, but the sign can't do the saving work on your heart, something else has to happen to your heart. He is also telling us that if a circumcised person can have a bad heart and not be saved as it is manifested with disobedience, then the same is true for an uncircumcised person, meaning they can have a new heart and it's evidenced by their love and obedience to God's Word. The heart trumps the external sign for the sign can't save, you need a saved heart. Ethnicity won't get you to heaven. There is a place for the external sign but it's not a saving act. The saving act has to be done internally and it's a matter of the heart, by the Spirit. The work of the Spirit does the work of saving circumcision in the name of Christ and God's praise and affirmation is upon those who have a circumcised heart, not necessarily on those who a physically circumcised.

So, what is ultimately being said in this text from Romans 2:25–29? First, you have to understand what the Bible is doing with signs and seals. Why were they called 'the circumcision'? It's because God told His people – the children of Abraham who come to Him – that they and their households are to be circumcised which becomes the sign and seal of the covenant. A sign and a seal serve two purposes. Number one, as a sign it communicates truth.

God wants you to have the significant truth (sign-ificant). They are symbols pointing to something of substance. It is there to instruct us about something we need to know as God is revealing it to us. Secondly, as a seal it declares the integrity of the Covenant Maker and the faith and trust of the covenant receiver. In other words, the Covenant Maker gives the covenant sign and seal to say 'I will do what I promise' and the one who receives the covenant says "I believe You and put my trust in You." But as Paul has made clear here, the external sign does not save.

In a few weeks I'll be attending the General Assembly of the PCA to deal with some theological issues. The first General Assembly was in Jerusalem as we know from Acts 15. They assembled to deal with theological issues and one of the issues had to do with whether someone had to be circumcised to be saved – the sign necessary? The question was, do you have to be circumcised in order to come to Christ to be saved and the answer they came to was 'no.' Paul is fleshing all this out here in this Romans text, what had already been debated and declared from that General Assembly. One of the things Paul points out here is, the value of circumcision and the misuse of circumcision. It can't save but it has value for the saved as a sign and seal of the New Covenant. There has to be an internal reality of what happens in the heart for the external to be of value.

Here's an illustration from baseball. Pretty soon there will be an all-star game. I love the quote from what I would say is the greatest hitter who has ever lived and that is Ted Williams. When they asked Ted Williams about one of his contemporaries, Willie Mays, he said "Have you ever heard of the all-star game? That game was invented for Willie Mays for there is not a better all-star because he can do everything. He is the most amazing baseball player I have ever seen." If you ever saw Willie Mays play, he would be wearing a uniform, a baseball cap, baseball spikes, a glove and he has a bat. About 40 to 50 years ago, I played baseball and I had a uniform, a cap, spikes, a glove and a bat and just like Willie Mays I could put all that on and then go play baseball, but what walked out onto that field was not Willie Mays. I had the same externals but I didn't have what he had. In my generation we used to call this 'the posers' where one would get all the paraphernalia but you don't have it.

This is what Paul is telling us about the signs and seals. The signs and seals do not change the heart and can't save you. When you get to the Judgment Seat that is not your defense strategy for it will be dismantled even as Paul is doing that in this text. In the old covenant you could be circumcised and be saved and you could be circumcised and lost. There are a number of examples for both of these in the Old Testament. Esau sought for repentance with tears but he didn't have it. There were the thousands at the bottom of Mount Sinai who were saved and worshipped the golden calf and the judgment of God fell upon them.

Secondly, Paul is saying as well that you can be uncircumcised and be lost which is obvious but you can be uncircumcised and be saved. The very first one we see of this was Abraham. His conversion is found in Genesis 15:6 which says [6] *And he (Abraham) believed the LORD, and He counted it to him as righteousness.* He received a new heart and a new record and was saved. Abraham didn't get circumcised until Genesis 17 and he wasn't unsaved from Genesis 15 to Genesis 17. The outward sign was affirming what the inward work had accomplished. So that is how we see the sign and seal at work in the Old Covenant.

Let me now bring this to the New Covenant. Because the bloody sign of circumcision which points to Christ is now fulfilled in Christ and is now replaced with bloodless sign of baptism just as the bloody sign of the Passover pointing to Christ is fulfilled in Christ, who is the Lamb of God and the New Covenant meal that replaces the Passover is the bloodless sign of the

Lord's Supper that points back to Christ. The Old Covenant signs anticipated Christ, now what were they signifying? Circumcision was the cutting of the flesh and with the cutting of flesh there is the shedding of blood. We are born with a sin record and without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin. Romans 6:23 says [23] *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Circumcision for God's covenant people affirmed they were sinners and they needed a substitutionary sacrifice to shed the blood of life on our behalf and take the judgment of God for us. We also need a new record – the righteousness of God.

Colossians 2:11–14 says [11] *In Him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, [12] having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised Him from the dead. [13] And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, [14] by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside, nailing it to the cross.*

When Christ goes to the cross, He cuts away our sin record and cancels our debt by nailing it to the cross. When He was nailed to the cross, He bore all of our sins, in thought, word and deed, so that we could be declared right with God. He is our Circumcision. We are His and He is ours. He is the fulfillment of circumcision and that's why it's eternal – it's eternally fulfilled in Christ. As He did this, He also cut out our sinful heart (the heart of stone) and He gave us a new heart in His hands that has God's law written upon it so that we're drawn to do it from the heart. We don't do the law to be saved, we do the law for our Savior.

Circumcision can't instruct us. Christ is our circumcision and this is seen in Hebrews, Philippians, I Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians and more. I love what J. Vernon McGee said, "I'm tired of hearing preachers tell you to give your heart to Jesus for where in the Bible does it tell you to give your heart to Jesus. The Gospel is not you give your heart to Jesus for the Gospel is, when you come to Jesus, He gives you a new heart." Jesus nails that filthy old heart to the cross also. Christ then gives a new sign for new believers where it points back to Christ. We get a new heart because we have been sprinkled clean, baptized with the blood of Christ and the Spirit of God has been poured out upon us and we are sealed in Christ. And the New Covenant sign can't save you anymore than the Old Covenant sign yet it has great value in its teaching so that it is God giving us a sign – giving what He promised to do and we can depend on Him. Then we receive that sign and say 'I believe You.'

Here's another illustration from a wedding. A covenant of marriage is done at a wedding where two believers make promises to one another in this covenant– a husband and wife. When they finish giving their vows, I say to them 'What sign do you bring to acknowledge the sincerity of your covenant vows?' A ring is given which is an appropriate sign because it's unending and a life long covenant. It's gold, untarnished and by God's grace may their commitments be untarnished. Does the ring make the marriage? No, for it is the holy covenant of God where the two become one. The ring is for the covenant maker to tell the covenant recipient that they will do what they promised.

Circumcision in the Old Testament was God's ring designed to point you to Christ who is our Circumcision. In the New Testament God's covenant ring for His people is baptism designed to keep you pointing back to what Christ did at the cross when He sends forth His Spirit and makes you clean with His blood as He gives you a new record and a new heart, sealing you by the Spirit that is poured out upon you. It is a glorious purpose and it's a glorious moment

when one says they believe God's promises are yes and amen in Christ, therefore in the name of Christ we are baptized. We do this because we trust Him to do what He has promised. Remember God's covenant with Noah, when He said He would never judge the world by water but one day by fire and the sign of His covenant was the rainbow, from horizon to horizon.

Genesis 9:12–17 says [12] *And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: [13] I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. [14] When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, [15] I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. [16] When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." [17] God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."*

Baptism is not the sign of the church, it's God's sign to be received by faith, to tell God "I believe what You promised." Thus, that's its function but it can't save for it doesn't have to power to save. So, in the New Covenant you can be baptized and saved or baptized and lost and that's why we don't call it a christening. We don't put Christ into people through baptizing – it's not Christianizing. God has designed baptism for a particular purpose.

In Acts 8 we see a man named Simon, a magician, who saw people being saved and baptized by the Apostles. He wanted to get in on what was happening and he "believed for a little while" for it wasn't saving faith but a temporary faith and he was baptized by the Apostles. Then a little later he offered them money to buy this "holy Spirit thing" for he said this could really help him in his act. Peter responded to him in Acts 8:20–23 which says [20] *But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! [21] You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. [22] Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. [23] For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity."* Simon had been baptized but he was still lost.

You can also be unbaptized and be saved. The example of this is the thief on the cross next to Jesus. One minute he is mocking and blaspheming Jesus and over the hours the Holy Spirit comes and cuts out his old heart and gives him a new heart. What Jesus is doing on the cross will cover his sins and give him His righteousness and turns from a blasphemer into a worshipper, from a mocker into bearing witness of Christ, he confesses he is a sinner and that Christ alone can save him but he never was baptized for he died that day on a cross, yet Jesus said 'Today you shall be with Me in paradise' (Luke 23:43) because He had poured upon him the blood of Christ that cleanses us from our sin. Christ, the Baptizer, baptizes His people with the Spirit of God as He seals them, sanctifies them and saves them.

Why do we call ourselves baptized believers or the circumcision? It is not because baptism or circumcision saves but because it is identified with the Gospel. I want to give you one more illustration. Let's say you drive with me down highway 280 and then you say 'Harry, we're in Childersburg.' How did you know that? It because you saw a sign we had just passed that said 'Childersburg city limits.' This sign signifies something – where we are at. The sign is identified with the city – with what its to symbolize. Let's say I dig up that sign and put it in my car and brought it back to Birmingham, did I bring the city of Childersburg back to Birmingham? No, for the sign identifies with what it signifies but it is not synonymous with what it signifies.

Baptism and circumcision are of great value in what they signify in the life of the church but they cannot be used as something that we think will save us at the Day of Judgment.

Here is the takeaway. At the Judgment the religion of irreligion, the man-made thoughts religion cannot save you, but neither can the privileges, ministries or external signs and seals of true religion. I can preach sermons, faithful to God's Word sermons, not perfectly, until I'm blue in the face but I'm not going to heaven because of the sermons I preach. I'm not going to heaven because I have shared the Gospel with people. We go to heaven only in Christ – Christ in you, and you in Christ. True religion is there to point you to that and then mature, mobilize and manifest you for that's its purpose and great value, including baptism and circumcision. Praise God for the privileges of true religion for it's a means of God's grace to grow us. Praise God for the ministries of true religion because we can be guided and we can guide others. We can be taught and we can teach others, we can be disciplined and disciple others. We're changed so that the redeemed of the Lord can say so in worship. Praise God for the signs and seals of the covenant which are sacred but they cannot save.

One night when I pastored a church in Charlotte, I took two teams out for EE training. On one team was a man named Harry and one named Jeb. We went to visit a lady and her children and I went in to her house with one team and got it started and then handed it over to another on the team. Then I went and got the other team and took them to another place and got them started and then went back over to where the first team was. When I got there Harry came running out and said 'Harry you've got to get in here for we're going to get arrested.' I came in and Jeb had this poor lady backed up against the wall telling her 'no, no that won't save you for you have to be saved.' Now I know why it's important to do training. Then I heard her say 'I told you I've been baptized.' I have heard that so many times. I don't know if it's intentional or unintentional because the sign is identified they think it's synonymous and if they have it they think they are saved.

I remember the dream of Whitfield. He said 'Before I came to preach today I fell asleep last night and I heard Gabriel beckoning me to heaven. I said 'Gabriel, Gabriel, who is in heaven? Are there Presbyterians?' He said 'no' and I said 'are there Baptists or Episcopalians?' He said 'no, no,' 'then who is in heaven, Gabriel?' He said 'Christians, those who are in Christ and Christ is in them.' I was transported to the gates of hell and as the heat and Sulphur came upon me I said to Satan 'are there any Presbyterians, Baptists or Episcopalians in hell?' He said 'Yes.' I said 'Satan are there any Christians here.' He said 'Oh no, they are all in heaven.'

To bring it back to this Romans 2 text, 'Gabriel are there any people baptized in heaven or were never baptized in heaven?' 'Yes.' Don't you know, you're a preacher, for baptism is great but it doesn't save or condemn. It's a sign and seal but no one is saved by it and no one can be lost because they didn't yet have it. I say to Satan, 'are there anyone baptized or unbaptized in hell?' He says 'oh yes.' The God designed sign and seal was not designed to save for it was designed to point you to the Savior. Come to Him today. Let's pray.

Prayer:

God thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. Thank Father for the grace and mercy that is found in Christ. Holy Spirit please speak to the hearts of those reading this today. Father, help us to rightly apply the signs and seals of the covenant because of their great value – baptism and the Lord's Supper – even as we rejoice in Christ that we are circumcised and have been baptized with the Holy Spirit and the blood of Christ. While the external signs can't save us the internal work points to where we can have a circumcised heart and record, in Christ.

If you have not yet come to Christ today, perhaps you were depending on the privileges and ministries you have done in the church or the signs and the seals of baptism and the Lord's Supper, while realizing they have their God designed honoring use, they cannot save so come to Christ today to be forgiven with a new heart and a new record. Jesus, I pray this in Your matchless Name, Amen.

Power Point

In the Old Covenant, the people were called the "Circumcision," but may or may not be saved; likewise in the New Covenant, people are to be "Baptized," but they may or may not be saved.

"Yet you must be Circumcised and Baptized to be saved"

THE TEXT

The "Signs and Seals" of the Covenant serve two purposes
Circumcision and Passover = Baptism and Communion

1. *Sign*—To communicate Truth > Sign—ificant
2. *Seal*—To declare the Integrity of the Covenant Maker and the Faith of the Covenant Receiver

THE THEMES OF THE TEXT

In the Old Covenant...

1. You can be circumcised and be saved and you can be circumcised and be lost.
2. You can be uncircumcised and be lost and you can be uncircumcised and be saved.

In the New Covenant...

1. You can be baptized and be saved and you can be baptized and be lost.
2. You can be unbaptized and be lost and you can be unbaptized and be saved.

LIFE TAKEAWAY

At the Judgment, the religion of irreligion nor man-made false religion can save you; but neither can the privileges, ministries or external "signs and seals" of true religion save you. Christ alone saves sinners who come to Him by faith and repentance which He gives you by His grace.

The "Circumcision of Christ" – "Baptism of Christ"