

TRUE CIRCUMCISION (The Self-Righteous, Part 2)

Romans 2:17–29

Key Verse: 2:29

“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.”

Have you ever heard the question, “Are you for real?” or “For real?” They are popular American idioms. They mean, “Are you telling the truth?” “For real” can also mean, “Are you genuine, sincere?” It’s why people use the word “really” so much. Since the onset of movies and television, we live in a culture of appearance and performance. Now, with AI, people are even more skeptical of what’s real. In texting, people write, “FR,” or, “FRFR,” or, “BFR.” For decades, people have been asking this question for important reasons: “For **real**?” (Do you **really** love me?) “For **real**?” (Are you **really** my friend?) We can ask it at church: “For **real**?” (Are you **really** a Christian?) “For **real**?” (Do I **really** love God?)

In today’s passage Paul continues to go after who is real and who is fake. We may think it’s *other* people’s problem. But we’re *all* more susceptible to fakeness than we realize. In the context of these verses, we see that fakeness comes from a false security—relying on things to protect us that really won’t. We want to see how this applies, and find what fake “hiding places” we may be relying on today. May God speak to us through his word.

Part 1: Context

At the beginning of this letter Paul wrote that the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (1:16). Then he launched the first section of this letter with the words: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (1:18). “Suppressing the truth” means this world is intentionally ignoring reality, especially the reality of our Creator God. In 1:19–32 Paul mainly described the non-Jewish world, which in his time was filled with various idols and all kinds of amorality. Then in 2:1–11 he described the self-righteous, who pass judgment on “those” idolatrous, amoral people. In 2:12–16 he contrasted those who have the law and those who don’t. He declared that in both cases they were guilty, because they failed to obey the truth that God gave them.

Now, in 2:17–29 Paul begins and ends with the words “a Jew.” In verses 17–21 he mentions “the law,” and in verses 22–29 he mentions “circumcision.” So, in these verses he’s zeroing in on the Jews. Why? Paul is trying to help them see that, in their current state, they, too, are under the wrath of God, just like everyone else. It was shocking. In the first part of chapter 2, Paul already wrote about hypocrisy—passing judgment on others but practicing the same things. He also defended God’s character. Though God has wrath and fury against sin, he is rich in kindness and forbearance and patience, to lead us to repentance. God also is impartial. He judges both the Jew and the Greek based not only on what we do, but also on our

motives. Now Paul proceeds to help the Jews see that even the things they rely on—knowing the Law of God and practicing circumcision—do not save them from God’s wrath.

From his Law the Jews learned that God is holy and just, and that he surely punishes sin. But they thought having the Law and circumcision shielded them from God’s wrath. Why? Through them, God in his grace made a covenant with them. If they learned his Law and kept his covenant of circumcision, they believed God would be faithful to them, despite their sins. But Paul is trying to help them see that even knowing God’s Law and being circumcised did not make them “righteous,” safe from God’s wrath and judgment. How could that be? Paul explained in 2:13: “For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.” In Greek, “righteous” and “justified” are the same word (*dikaïos/dikaïoo*). Paul is picking up on his main theme in Romans, that in the gospel “the righteousness of God is revealed” (1:17). He’s showing that through the good news of his Son Jesus Christ and his resurrection, people can be made righteous, or right with God, through faith in Jesus. It’s not just an optional spiritual life we can take or leave; it’s a matter of salvation from God’s wrath (Rom. 2:5,8; 5:9). It’s very different from trying to follow the law of God on our own. Twice in his other letters Paul mentions “the new covenant” we have with God through our faith in Christ (1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6). In Romans he describes it as “the new way of the Spirit” (7:6). We’ll see more about this new covenant in the Spirit in today’s key verse.

Part 2: Hiding behind the law (17–24)

Let’s read verses 17–19. Notice two slightly odd expressions Paul uses: “call yourself” (17) and “sure that you yourself” (19). With these subtle jabs Paul is dismantling the Jews’ self-deception about who they really are. Only having the law and circumcision do not make a real Jew. Though he doesn’t use the word “hypocrite,” Paul repeatedly refers to their hypocrisy by saying they have and know the law but don’t keep it. In Greek, “hypocrisy” meant to “wear a mask.” Today it describes a fake or phony person. To Paul, it’s another way of “suppressing the truth,” and another reason we come under the wrath of God. This was not just a Jewish problem. It’s easy to fall into play-acting that we’re Christians. We know the right things and say the right things, but don’t actually believe or live by them.

Let’s read verse 20. Let’s look more closely at this, to fully grasp Paul’s view of the law, because throughout this chapter he also mentions human inability to keep it, thus producing hypocrisy. So, it’s not too far a reach to conclude that Paul thinks all law leads to hypocrisy. Some consider it a mandate to get rid of everything that smacks of rules. But Paul wasn’t trying to get rid of the law. Here he says in the law we have “the embodiment of knowledge and truth.” He’s going to say more about this in chapter 7. But for now, Paul’s point is not that the law is bad; in fact, the law instructs us in God’s will and enables us to approve of what is excellent (18). Knowing the law has the potential to make us a guide to the blind, a light to people in darkness, an instructor of the foolish (19–20a).

Sadly, the Jews couldn’t fulfill the hope of the law. Let’s read verses 21–23. How could Paul write so boldly to Jews he probably never met? It’s because he himself grew up a Jew and knew their world so well. He didn’t need to meet them to know human nature. Wherever the law

is held up as a place to hide from God, hypocrisy is almost always there. And an important note on “teach yourself” (21a). Paul isn’t saying we all need to try harder to practice what we preach. That’s just trading one form of legalism for another. He’s calling us not to work more earnestly at fixing ourselves; he’s calling us to expose our own sins, to be honest, not fake. We need to let God’s word be like a mirror we look in to see our own spiritual state. We need to repent first, to be real first.

We Christians shouldn’t think we’re any better than the Jews; we should consider how, even in all our knowledge and outward strictness, we may be hiding the same self-serving spirit or our true, unchanged hearts. Like “stealing” God’s glory when we seek to take credit for things. Or pretending to be an authentic person while we treat those closest to us with indifference. Or “stealing” time for family by pursuing a career, while saying, “family first.” Like having “spiritual adultery,” loving a position more than God himself. Or acting like I value true love or respect while being addicted to porn. Or treating my children’s success as my “savior.” Like “robbing God’s temple” by trying to take God’s grace for my own gain or ego. It’s good for Paul’s questions here to make us squirm.

And it gets even worse, because it’s bigger than just us. Let’s read verse 24. This may be Paul’s most piercing reality check. Who are “the Gentiles”? They’re not a certain race; in the Bible they represent all non-Jewish people around the world. God wanted the Jews to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation for the world (Ex. 19:6). He wanted his people to share God’s word, God’s character, and God’s saving love for all human beings. But when they turned inward and became vain and selfish, they dishonored God’s name. They failed to fulfill his purpose for the world. Still, God’s great hope for them remains. In Romans 15 Paul spends verses 8–21 describing the greatness of God’s hope to reach them, which Paul had given his very life to. “Gentiles” today still represent people outside the Christian community. They’re not familiar with the Bible, the gospel, or what it means to live by faith. In God’s reality, we’re his representatives even though we may not realize it. When we use strict legalism to hide our sin, we cause God’s name to be blasphemed, vandalized. What non-Christians often hear about is the failings of so-called Christians, which makes our faith look as fake as the rest of the world. The ultimate “reality check” is this: Is the way I live making people want to know God, or is it giving them the excuse to ignore him?

Part 3: Hiding behind “circumcision” (25–27)

Let’s read verse 25. Paul puts his finger on the other hiding place of the Jews. They not only “relied on” or “rested in” the law (17); they also rested in their circumcision. They thought it guaranteed that they belonged to God, regardless of how sinful or hypocritical they were. Paul makes another shocking statement here: “if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.” This again may sound irrelevant to us today. But there are certain outward signs that we think mark us as Christians: our Christian family background; how we might identify publicly as Christians; being baptized or taking communion; our visible disciplines of daily devotions, reading the Bible, and never missing church; the way we dress or keep ourselves from following what non-believers do; our church membership or title; even our

financial giving. All good things. But are we using these things to hide what's really going on in our souls?

To help these people wake up, Paul says more. Let's read verses 26–27. Here, “uncircumcised” means Gentiles, or non-Christians. The word “keeps” is literally “watches or guards” through obedience. And the word “precepts” here is *dikaïoma*, meaning a righteous act or justified standard. Paul's point is shocking: these unexpected people can in fact be more righteous than those who've only got the outward signs of being God's people (also see verses 14–15). In this part, “circumcision” is kind of like a wedding ring. It's an outward, visible thing, but valuable only if the substance of the relationship is there. Likewise, even baptism or social justice causes won't save us, because they're only outward activities of something that's supposed to be there inwardly.

Part 4: The Spirit's heart surgery (28–29)

Let's read verse 28. With one sentence, Paul is redefining what it means to be a Jew and what circumcision means. God already defined circumcision this way. He told his people in Deuteronomy 10:16, “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.” And later, Deuteronomy tells us that only God can circumcise our hearts to truly love him (30:6). But Paul takes it in an original direction in the last verse, verse 29. Let's read it. Here, Paul brings the focus back to the heart. But he adds the expression “the letter.” And he contrasts it with the Spirit (cf. 2 Cor. 3:6). Here, “the letter” literally means the written words of God. Paul doesn't use the term “the letter” negatively. God himself gave his people these letters, these written words. The term “the letter” only shows the limitation of the law. Without meaning, the words are just “letters.”

In mentioning the Spirit, Paul is talking about a new era. The old era is the era of the law; the new era is the era of the Spirit. This change in eras is the fulfillment of the new covenant, in which God promised to give us a new heart and put his Spirit within us (Jer. 31:33; Eze. 36:26–27). The Spirit is who gives us assurance that we belong to God (Rom. 8:16). The Spirit is who leads us to be filled with praise to God (Rom. 15:11). In this new era of the Spirit, physical circumcision is no longer needed. And a real Jew is not an ethnic Jew or a physically circumcised person. A real Jew is someone in whom God's Spirit has worked through the gospel of Jesus to change the person's heart. There's a new reality in this. This is where real praise comes from. Actually, the name “Jew” itself means “Praisers.” A fake Jew seeks praise from man. But a real Jew gets the ultimate praise— from God himself.

When we invite the Holy Spirit to circumcise our hearts, we become good missionaries and shepherds of his flock. When we ask the Holy Spirit to change us, we become good husbands and good wives. When we let the Holy Spirit circumcise our hearts, we become good parents. When we pray for the Holy Spirit to circumcise our hearts, we become good children to our parents, good Bible teachers and disciple-makers, good Bible students, and real friends (instead of business associates). When we allow the Holy Spirit to circumcise our hearts, we're not discouraging but a blessing to those who don't know God.

We all need the surgery of the Holy Spirit. Like surgery, it may seem scary and painful to have what's really in my heart exposed. But like surgery, it saves, heals, and brings new life. On Tuesday I'm going to have a pretty safe procedure to close a congenital hole in my heart. But what I really need is the Spirit's work to keep changing my heart. My title "senior pastor," knowledge, and decades of experience are no hiding place from the living God. Just as in surgery, I need to surrender and become totally helpless and vulnerable to him. I need God's mercy and his Spirit to root out my arrogance, self-reliance, and wrong ideas about others. I need the Spirit to grow in authentic love for him and for people. I need the Spirit to inspire and deepen my prayer life and my utter dependence on him.

So, are you for real? Are we hiding behind things that seem to make us Christian? Are we ready to open the reality of our hearts to God and invite the Spirit to do the painful work of circumcision? Let's read verse 29 again. May God help us not to rest on flimsy things but open up to let the Spirit change our hearts.