

Exegetical Analysis of Romans 2:17-29

Ian A. Hicks

17-24 – But if you bear the name "Jew" and rely upon the Law and boast in God, [18] and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law, [19] and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, [20] a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth, [21] you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? [22] You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? [23] You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? [24] For "the NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES because OF YOU," just as it is written. (17. Εἰ δὲ σὺ Ἰουδαῖος ἐπονομάζῃ καὶ ἐπαναπαύῃ νόμῳ καὶ καυχᾶσαι ἐν θεῷ 18. καὶ γινώσκεις τὸ θέλημα καὶ δοκιμάζεις τὰ διαφέροντα κατηχούμενος ἐκ τοῦ νόμου 19. πέποιθας τε σεαυτὸν ὁδηγὸν εἶναι τυφλῶν, φῶς τῶν ἐν σκότει, 20. παιδευτὴν ἀφρόνων, διδάσκαλον νηπίων, ἔχοντα τὴν μόρφωσιν τῆς γνώσεως καὶ τῆς ἀληθείας ἐν τῷ νόμῳ· 21. ὁ οὖν διδάσκων ἕτερον σεαυτὸν οὐ διδάσκεις; ὁ κηρύσσων μὴ κλέπτειν κλέπτεις; 22. ὁ λέγων μὴ μοιχεύειν μοιχεύεις; ὁ βδελυσσόμενος τὰ εἰδῶλα ἱεροσυλεῖς; 23. ὃς ἐν νόμῳ καυχᾶσαι, διὰ τῆς παραβάσεως τοῦ νόμου τὸν θεὸν ἀτιμάζεις· 24. τὸ γὰρ ὄνομα τοῦ θεοῦ δι' ὑμᾶς βλασφημεῖται ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν καθὼς γέγραπται)

Paul's overall theme between (vs.17-29) is to call out his fellow Jews because they are boasting and relying on the Law. He's attacking the Law Keepers, and those that are circumcised in the flesh. It's essentially an attack against Jewish national pride. That's why Paul goes into detail calling out the Jew. "But if you bear the name "Jew" and rely upon the Law and boast in God". Without a proper contextual analysis, we will not be able to come to the end of the chapter with an appropriate conclusion. Here, we get a glimpse of this national pride:

A. And Know His will (καὶ γινώσκεις τὸ θέλημα)

B. Approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law (δοκιμάζεις τὰ διαφέροντα κατηχούμενος ἐκ τοῦ νόμου)

C. Confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness (πέποιθας τε σεαυτὸν ὁδηγὸν εἶναι τυφλῶν, φῶς τῶν ἐν σκότει)

D. Corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth (παιδευτὴν ἀφρόνων, διδάσκαλον νηπίων, ἔχοντα τὴν μόρφωσιν τῆς γνώσεως καὶ τῆς ἀληθείας ἐν τῷ νόμῳ)

E. Who teach another, do you not teach yourself? (ὁ οὖν διδάσκων ἕτερον σεαυτὸν οὐ διδάσκεις)

F. You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? (ὁ κηρύσσων μὴ κλέπτειν κλέπτεις;)

G. You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? (ὁ λέγων μὴ μοιχεύειν μοιχεύεις)

H. You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? (ὁ βδελυσσόμενος τὰ εἰδωλα ἱεροσυλεῖς;)

Paul then asks an important question after he's called out the Jews. He asks the Jews: You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? James D.G. Dunn remarks:

“The detail indicates that the indictment is not intended as an accusation of wholesale Jewish profligacy, but as a pricking of the balloon of Jewish pride and presumption that being the people of God's law puts them in a uniquely privileged position in relation to the rest of humankind. If a Jew is guilty of the sins he condemns in others, he is equally condemned. A Gentile who does not have the law but keeps it can hardly be in a less advantageous position than a Jew who has the law but fails to keep it. Not to be ignored is the fact that it is the law as ethical standard which is commended here (vv. 21-23), over against the law in its function as a boundary marking off Jews as an entity from the rest of humankind (vv. 25–29).”¹

Paul here is asking the Jew (if you bear the name Jew) what boasting in the Law, acting superior really accomplishes? Does that really honor God? The Jews were, as a nationalistic entity, boasting, yet their boasting was in their distinctiveness and their privilege by virtue of the Law. Paul is clearly rebuking and exhorting any such practice. James D.G. Dunn further remarks:

“What is set in contrast, therefore, are the national pride of the typical Jew in the law, over against instances of transgression of the law by Jews. The argument is that the transgression of any individual Jew is enough to call in question the Jewish assumption that as a Jew he stands in a position of privilege and superiority before God as compared with the Gentile.”²

See, to the Jew, the Law is what matters, the Law is the solution, the Law governs all, but they failed to ask of what God wants for them? It seems as though Israel has failed to understand the relationship between Law and circumcision, to the proper application of the Law and God's will and desire:

“The implication indeed is that the Jew as such is not fulfilling the role of Israel, that he is mistaking his priorities, that he has misunderstood God's will, boasts in God misguidedly, and has a false confidence in the law. Implicit also for many of those listening to Paul's letter being read would be the assertion that discernment of God's will and God's priorities in any instance is not to be read off the Torah but comes through a much more existential openness to God and his Spirit (cf. 12:2; Phil 1:9-10), that Christ is the true embodiment of God's wisdom, not the law (1 Cor 1:24, 30), and that it is only through the gospel that Israel's role as leader of the blind and

¹ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans* in the Word Biblical Commentary. Vol. 38A: Romans 1-8. (Word Books, 1988), 108.

² James D. G. Dunn, *Romans* in the Word Biblical Commentary. Vol. 38A: Romans 1-8. (Word Books, 1988), 116.

light to those in darkness can be fulfilled (cf. 1 Cor 4:5; 2 Cor 4: 6) -the very role the Jew per se is rejecting by his rejection of the gospel and Christ. This will begin to become clearer shortly in vv. 25–29 even that the interlocutor's right to the name "Jew" stands in question (vv. 28-29)."³

As one who would be proud (the Jew), hearing these rhetorical like questions, implies that they don't understand the Law, they are in no place to be teaching, they are in no place to be a light, or a guide. These Jews are acting in complete violation of the Law, by their actions. The other big downfall was that the Jew failed to understand that the true embodiment of knowledge is Jesus, not the Law. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law.

1 Corinthians 1:24,30 NASB

but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. [30] But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption,

Colossians 2:2-3 NASB

that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, [3] in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

See, this national boasting is a disgrace to those around them (Gentile nations). The Jews have dishonoured God by breaking the same Law that they are boasting in.

25-29 – For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. [26] So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? [27] And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law? [28] For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. [29] But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God. (25. Περιτομή μὲν γὰρ ὠφελεῖ ἐὰν νόμον πράσσης· ἐὰν δὲ παραβάτης νόμου ᾖ ἡ περιτομή σου ἀκροβυστία γέγονεν. 26. ἐὰν οὖν ἡ ἀκροβυστία τὰ δικαιώματα τοῦ νόμου φυλάσσει, οὐχ ἡ ἀκροβυστία αὐτοῦ εἰς περιτομήν λογισθήσεται; 27. καὶ κρινεῖ ἡ ἐκ φύσεως ἀκροβυστία τὸν νόμον τελούσα σε τὸν διὰ γράμματος καὶ περιτομῆς παραβάτην νόμου. 28. οὐ γὰρ ὁ ἐν τῷ φανερῷ Ἰουδαῖος ἐστὶν οὐδὲ ἡ ἐν τῷ φανερῷ ἐν σαρκὶ περιτομή, 29. ἀλλ' ὁ ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ Ἰουδαῖος, καὶ περιτομή καρδίας ἐν πνεύματι οὐ γράμματι, οὗ ὁ ἔπαινος οὐκ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ἀλλ' ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ)

As Paul has stripped the Jew from boasting in the Law, so will he strip the Jew of boasting and relying on their physical circumcision (Covenant Sign). The Jews had placed such a strong emphasis on proselytes being circumcised, demanding that they be circumcised to belong

³ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans* in the Word Biblical Commentary. Vol. 38A: Romans 1-8. (Word Books, 1988), 117.

to the people of the Covenant, it was terrible. The Jews believed that the sole marking feature between the Jews and Gentiles was circumcision of the flesh. This was the divide of both Jew and Gentile. Those with or without the Covenant.

Paul makes it clear just like he makes it clear regarding the Law, circumcision and the Law are profitable, when they are used correctly. Because the Jews transgressed the Law, they had become no different than the Gentiles (uncircumcised). Their boasting was futile because of their sin. Paul is making the case that although circumcision is important in the appropriate context, the Jews should have never been making such demands for the Gentiles, to be a part of the Covenantal blessings. The Jews placed far too much emphasis on the external, not the internal.

The climax of the passage (vs. 28-29) is where the culmination of Paul's point appears. The entire time Paul has been instructing the Jew not to boast, for they would be no different than the Gentiles, despite their privileges. They had seen all the external outworking but had failed to see the state of the heart. Obedience to the Law, circumcision of the flesh, was really for the Jew, the key. Paul makes it clear; it should have never been the key for the Jew.

Deuteronomy 30:6,10 NASB

"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. [10] if you obey the LORD your God to keep His commandments and His statutes which are written in this book of the law, if you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and soul.

See, the obedience to the Law, can only be fulfilled by the Law-giver himself. Jesus was the only one who could fulfill the Law and uphold the Law perfectly. The Jews failed to see that. Obedience to the Law of Christ is found only in a changed circumcised heart, not the flesh. Circumcision of the flesh is not the prerequisite for salvation, nor should it have been held up so high. Because the Jew had been so bold, so confident, so prideful, but appeared to repeatedly fail to see their own blind spot, they had essentially become the uncircumcised. One could argue that they had essentially traded places. James continues:

“This is the false confidence Paul now attacks head-on: circumcision, and of itself makes no difference; circumcision will not be sufficient to secure the salvation of anyone who is a transgressor of the law. Paul would be aware that such a blunt antithesis between circumcision and keeping law would surprise, even shock, a devout Jew. For the interlocutor, circumcision was not something other than law-keeping; on the contrary, it was the most fundamental act of the covenant and its law; failure to circumcise excluded from the covenant (Gen 17:14). Once a man had been circumcised the terms of the divine-human relationship were different: keeping the law was the way of life within the covenant; it did not affect the basic covenant status as such (as did circumcision). But Paul will have none of this: the law-breaking Jew is in just the same position as the sinful Gentile (whom he so often despised and condemned-1:19-2:3). His circumcision has become uncircumcision-a shocking charge for the pious Jew, for Paul could be understood as alluding to those hellenizing Jews of the Maccabean period who tried to turn their circumcision into uncircumcision by having the mark of circumcision removed or disguised, a course of action both heretical and treasonable in the eyes of the devout. To such covenant-

confident piety Paul says bluntly: your law-breaking has the same effect on your covenant status; transgression of the law in effect puts even the circumcised Jew outside the covenant.”⁴

Scholar Philip Schaff concurs:

“He is not a Jew who is one outwardly. This gives the sense of the original; but in this and the succeeding verse the construction is peculiar. The one who shows only the outward marks of a Jew is not a true Jew.”⁵

The *Jew* (True Jew) is the one that is circumcised in the heart, not in the flesh.

Note: What matters to Paul here is not that he is claiming that Gentiles are True Jews because they are likewise circumcised in the flesh, but rather that Jews, are only True Jews if they have been circumcised in the heart. It would make absolutely no sense at this point for Paul to suddenly shift his argument from rebuking the "Jew", to suddenly calling the Gentiles, Jews, in any sense. Paul's entire argument is to break down the Jews dependency on boasting in circumcision, and the Law. He does so by showing their behaviour being worst than the uncircumcised.

“Circumcision (v. 25) was viewed by later generations of the Jewish people as a virtual guarantee of eternal life (cf. the ancient rabbinic commentaries Gen R. 48 [30]; Exod. R. 19 [81]; and Tanhuma B, hayye Sarah 60P.8), and have been in Paul's day as well. Sin in the life of a circumcised Jew canceled out the benefits of circumcision. Conversely, if a Gentile kept the law and did not sin, he would receive the benefits of the covenant people of God. Once again, Paul's point is that disobedience brings condemnation whether one is a Jew or not, and obedience without sin brings salvation (vv. 26-27). For (v. 28) begins an explanation as to why being circumcised does not guarantee salvation. Here only in chap. 2 does Paul refer to believers, in this case exclusively Jewish believers, and his point is to argue that being right with God comes as He performs spiritual surgery upon the heart, not as one complies with the letter of the law, by undergoing circumcision in the flesh (v. 29). Note that Paul is speaking only of true, believing Jews in these verses. Gentile believers are not in view, and the idea that Gentile Christians are the new Israel is foreign to this section.”⁶

“A real Jew is the one who is not only a descendant of Abraham but who also manifests a godly life. This passage does not teach that all believers are Jews, or that the church is the Israel of God. Paul is talking about those who are born of Jewish parentage and is insisting that the mere fact of birth and the ordinance of circumcision are not enough. There must also be inward reality. True circumcision is a matter of the heart not just a literal cutting of the body but the spiritual reality of surgery on the old, unregenerate nature. Those who thus combine the outward sign and the inward grace receive God's praise, if not man's. There is a play on words in this last verse that is apparent in the English. The word not Jew "comes from" Judah, "meaning praise. A real Jew is

⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans* in the Word Biblical Commentary. Vol. 38A: Romans 1-8. (Word Books, 1988), 126.

⁵ Philip Schaff, *Commentary on Romans* 2:28.

⁶ Michael G. Vanlaningham, *Romans* in The Moody Bible Commentary, (Chicago, Moody Publishers, 2014), 1747.

one whose character is such as to receive praise from God.”⁷

“These verses form the conclusion to the entire section that begins with verse 17. Being a true or genuine Jew is not a matter of outward or external things (such as wearing phylacteries, paying tithes, or being circumcised). Genuine circumcision is not the physical rite itself. Rather, a genuine Jew is one inwardly and true circumcision is of the heart and by the Spirit. The NIV has rendered the Greek words "in spirit" as "by the Spirit," as though they refer to the Holy Spirit. However, it is better to understand this verse as saying that circumcision of heart fulfills "the spirit" of God's Law instead of mere outward conformity to the Law. Some Jews followed the Law's regulation outwardly, but their hearts were not right with God (Isa. 29:13). A circumcised heart is one that is "separated" from the world and dedicated to God. The true Jew receives his praise... not from men (as did the Pharisees) but from God, who sees people's inward natures (cf. Matt. 6: 4, 6) and discerns their hearts (cf. Heb. 4:12).”⁸

“This passage on the inner nature of a true "Jew," therefore, falls in the same category as the "Israel" of promise (9:6). In both contexts the discussion deals with the division between those who bear the name merely by ethnicity and those who also bear it with the more mean religious meaning-the latter not canceling out the former.”⁹

As we can see, Paul is clearly not calling the Jews, Gentiles or the Gentiles, Jews. What Paul is doing is showing that the Jews failed to understand their scripture and the will of God (Deut. 10:16, 30:6). The will of God was not to elevate circumcision of the flesh, or to uphold the Law to the degree that they had, but rather to have faith, which is given by God after regeneration. To be truly a "Jew" in the proper sense, and to praise God and honour him, is to have a circumcised heart. This is what God requires. The Jews needed to cease boasting over their privileges and submit themselves before the creator, realizing they are no better than the uncircumcised.

⁷ William Macdonald, and Arthur L. Farstad, *Romans* in the Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments, (Nashville, T. Nelson Publishers, 1995), 1685.

⁸ John A. Witmer, *Romans* in The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, (Wheaton, Ill., Victor Books, 1983), 448.

⁹ Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology*, 196.