

# THE ROAD OF THE RIGHTEOUS

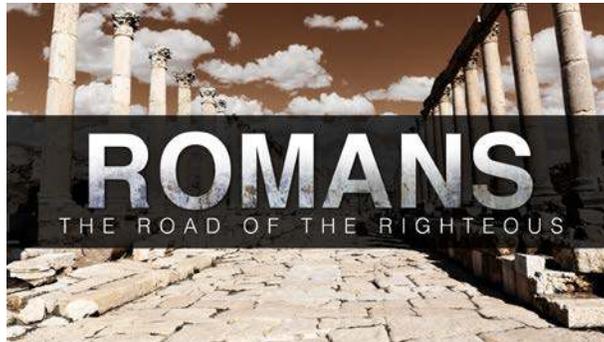
## Expositional Study Of Romans

Romans 2:17-29

Written By

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**W**hat is the greatest rude awakening you have ever experienced? Rude awakenings typically occur when you had greater thoughts about yourself than were actually warranted. You know the drill.

- You're eighteen.
- You think you are in fantastic shape.
- You have no body fat.
- You can eat what you want with no health issues.
- You know the physical challenges of playing sports.

So, you joined the military thinking boot camp, for you, would be a cakewalk. How did that turn out? Sure there are exceptions, but there are plenty of soldiers who discover during that first week their version of being in shape and that of the U.S. military are, well, diametrically opposed.

Get used to it. This life is full of rude wake up calls. Some you can avoid, or at least prepare for, while others hit you like a Mac truck, leaving you stunned and in a state of shock. The next life will also be full of rude wake up calls. How do I know that? Because of what Jesus said in His first sermon about what will occur at the foot of His throne on Judgment Day:

<sup>21</sup> Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup> Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' <sup>23</sup> And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'  
(Matt. 7).

Who are these people arguing with Jesus that *they*, of all people, should be permitted to walk into His heaven? Contextually and historically, they are the religious leaders of Israel, the Pharisees and Sadducees. Their lives were steeped in religious form, ceremony, legalistic laws, beautifully adorned clerical robes, well-worded memorized public prayers, and lofty liturgy. They taught themselves and others that all of these things guaranteed adherents a place at the table with Abraham and the Messiah in the heavenly kingdom.

Jesus's words were, on the contrary, a rude, but loving, wake-up call to these religious types then, and His warning is still applicable today. If you ground your salvation on outer religious forms with no inward renewal at the feet of Jesus by placing your faith in Him, you have nothing but a dead, lifeless husk of impotent belief. When you stand before the living God on Judgment Day you will be shocked to hear from the Judge that He does not even know you because you came to Him by means of your works and not His work on the cross.

Paul understood this sobering doctrinal truth. Writing to the spiritually smug Jews in the Roman culture of his day, He warns them by candidly answering a question which arises from his argument in Romans chapter 2:

## How Does God Respond To Moral/Religious People Who Appear Spiritual? (Rom. 2:1-16)

With eternity hanging in the balance, Paul, as a faithful preacher and teacher of the gospel, did not candy-coat his answer.

- *God Supplies The Reason For Divine Judgment* (Rom. 2:1). If you, as a Jew, judge others for being truly godless, while you think you are quite godly based on your devotion to religion and ritual, be what it may, you really do not have a proverbial leg to stand on because you are guilty of committing the same type of sins . . . just in a cleverer, internal fashion.
- *God Supplies The Rightness of His Judgment* (Rom. 2:2-4). God's judgment will rest upon the facts of your real acceptance or rejection of Him
- *God Supplies The Road Of Divine Judgment* (Rom. 2:5-11). Each man's sin will eventually fill the vault of wrath God has created, and one day that vault will be full, resulting in God moving in judgment. And when He judges He will be completely impartial. He won't care if you were a Jew or a Gentile, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, articulate or inarticulate, a nice person or a bad person, or a devoutly religious person or an outright pagan. He will only consider the facts of your life. Did you live for Him or for yourself? Did you embrace His gospel (Rom. 16-17) or your gospel?
- *God Supplies The Reality of Divine Judgment* (Rom. 2:12-29). What's the reality? Both Gentile and Jew will be judged in relation to how they responded to the law God revealed to them. And, since no one can, outside the Messiah, Jesus, ever fulfill the law because of their innate sinful status (Rom. 5:12-21), their obedience will be found wanting. To the Jew who thought they were heavenbound by the mere possession of the Torah Paul's teaching was jaw-dropping and jaw-clenching.

Paul, however, was not finished in his desperate attempt to break through the hardened spiritual soil of his brethren. Verses 17 through 29 support this conclusion.

Before we study Paul's teaching here, please, don't tune out the messenger. What Paul says here is applicable to anyone, Jew or Gentile, who feel that a reverence for and commitment to religious ritual, ceremony, and the like will, *ipso facto*, secure eternal salvation. They will not because these works, as I stated, selfishly by-pass God's redemptive work based on unadulterated divine grace. Take, for instance, an old friend of my father. After his retirement from U.S. Customs, he rose every morning to go down to his church and hand wash the stone statue of Mary. Believe me, you could not have known a better, more loyal and moral man. However, if this man never trusted, by faith, in the person and work of Jesus for his redemption, then works like this amount to nothing at the judgment bar of the Almighty. God is not looking for outer works but an inner work based on faith in His Son's work on the cross of Calvary.

With this in mind, let us carefully dissect Paul's words to the spiritually misled Jews of his day.

<sup>17</sup> But if you bear the name "Jew" and rely upon the Law and boast in God, <sup>18</sup> and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law, <sup>19</sup> and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, <sup>20</sup> a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth, <sup>21</sup> you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? <sup>22</sup> You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? <sup>23</sup> You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God?

The opening contrastive particle "but" (δέ) introduces us to a long and passionate conditional sentence, which runs from verses 17 through 20. Grammarians call this the protasis, and it does not find its grammatical completion, or the apodasis until verse 21. Until then, Paul checks off many items Jews held, or hold to, for securing their spiritual standing before God.

To be called a Jew was, in Paul's mind, an admirable, positive thing. They, of all the peoples of the earth, were, and are, God's chosen people, the people who received the covenants and laws of God (Deut. 7; Gen. 12; 2 Sam. 7). In Old Testament times, God's chosen people were called Hebrews and/or Israelites. It was not until the Maccabean period they accepted the term "Jew" (Ἰουδαῖος), which denoted the people dwelling in the land of Judea and who were known as strict loyalists to the Mosaic Law. Paul stresses this continual (which is denoted by the present tense nature of the verb, *εἰσπαραυομαι*, *ἐπαναπαύομαι*) law reliance when he says "[and you] rely upon the Law."

God had, in fact, given them His Law on Mount Sinai in the most ominous, spectacular fashion (Ex. 19:16-23:18), and His Law told them exactly how to live in order to please Him by giving them moral (Ex. 20:1-26), civil (Ex. 21:1-23:9), and ceremonial revelatory light (Ex. 23:10-19). Further, the Torah of the book of Leviticus told them that the only way they, as sinners, could approach the absolutely holy God was by means of blood sacrifices He required and approved (Lev. 1-7). Based, therefore on this one of several magnificent theophanies, the Jew did/does enjoy a unique and privileged position among all the people of the earth. This unique position was, indeed, something to "boast" about (as Paul did when he said he, prior to his conversion, loved the title "Hebrew of Hebrews, Phil. 3:5), for God had, in fact chosen them, the least of all peoples (Deut. 7) to be His people, to be His holy and priestly nation (Ex. 19:6), and to become His channel

of blessing to the Gentiles. This type of boasting, therefore, was logical for it focused on God, as Jeremiah taught (Jer. 9:23-24).

Additionally, the Jew, above all peoples, knew God's will regarding many matters because He told them His mind and will in the Torah, which covers numerous life situations. Yes, they, as Paul says, had the unique opportunity to know the difference between essential and non-essential moral matters. How should they treat leprous people? God told them (Lev. 13-14). What constitutes sexual perversion and immorality? God told them (Lev. 18). How should priests conduct themselves? God told them (Lev. 21). Yes, they of all people knew God's exact will on many life matters, and this knowledge put them in a unique and privileged position.

Because of their unique standing with the living God, the Jew logically saw himself as "a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness,<sup>20</sup> a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature." Of course, all of this pedagogical ability was tied to God's revelatory Law, as Paul says, "having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth." It was also wedded to God's revelatory words to the Jews in passages like Isaiah 42:6-7:

<sup>6</sup> I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you, and I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations,<sup>7</sup> To open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon, and those who dwell in darkness from the prison (Isa. 42).

While these words prophetically described the mission of the Messiah, all Jews believed these words encapsulated God's marching orders to them.

Jesus, the Messiah, therefore, rightfully extolled the worth of the Law when He claimed He had come to fulfill every facet of it (Matt. 5:17-18). And he, in the spirit of Isaiah, spoke openly about the fact He was THE light of the world (John 3:19-21; 8:12; 9:5). All Jews prior to the Messiah, then, merely fulfilled this divinely appointed role just on a smaller scale. Hence, Paul was not denigrating his Jewish brethren in these sweeping statements. *They did possess God's spiritual truth.* Jesus said this much to the Samaritan woman He met at the well one afternoon when He emphatically noted, "<sup>22</sup> You worship that which you do not know; we worship that which we know, for salvation is from the Jews" (John 4).

Paul's issue with his Jewish brethren was they failed miserably to *practice the Law* they possessed. Or to couch it in our terms, they didn't practice what preached. Instead of allowing God's Law to move them toward holiness, toward seeing their inability to completely fulfill the Law, resulting in them seeing the need for the Messiah as the Savior (Isa. 53), they, on the contrary, worshipped the form, ceremony, ritual and liturgy of the Law. The mere possession of the Law, then, became their hope in life to come because God had given it to *them*.

However, while they prided themselves in their Jewishness and in their reception of the Law, they failed to be true lovers of the principles of the Law. In this respect, Paul said they were nothing more than spiritual hypocrites. He levels this just judgment with a series of five rhetorical questions:

<sup>21</sup> you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? <sup>22</sup> You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? <sup>23</sup> You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God?

These rhetorical questions made His Jewish audience take a deep breath. It should make you take a deep breath . . . me too. God isn't interested in people who claim to know Him who are *all form* and *no function*, who are *all talk* and *no do*. He is interested in people who know Him by faith and live for Him, who know that form doesn't save. Faith saves.

Paul's Jewish opponents, like the Pharisees, might be great teachers and communicators of the Law; however, as Jesus noted, they were nothing more than "blind guides" (Matt. 15:14; 23:24) because they had never come to have a faith relationship with the living God. They, like the Pharisees, had made their lives look white or holy by a strict commitment to religious laws, rules, regulations, and rituals; however, because they really didn't know God on God's narrow terms their lives were really nothing more than whitewashed tombs full of spiritual death and darkness (Matt. 23:27). All the Jews reading Paul's words knew they were guilty of the sins listed, even down to robbing temples. What does this mean? It probably denotes the practice of stealing costly idols from pagan temples and melting them down for other uses . . . like making jewelry, despite the fact the Law prohibited this (Deut. 7:26). One can easily see how this type of activity could be easily rationalized, "Ah, what better thing could we do than melt down a pagan idol and form it into some religious Jewish jewelry? Certainly God wouldn't have any issue with that."

What happens when a so-called religious person lives contrary to their religion? Paul answers that question by quoting from Isaiah 52:5,

<sup>24</sup> For "THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU," just as it is written.

When your life does not match your theology it results in God's holy name being blasphemed by non-believers who are watching your life. Israel did this in Old Testament and New Testament times and the result was always the same. No Gentile would want to know the Jewish God because the Jewish lives didn't look that much different from the Gentile lives.

In all of this, Paul says the Jews were nothing but spiritual hypocrites who professed they knew God, but who, in fact, do not possess Him, nor He them. They were all outer spirituality with no inner spirituality, and they were all condemned because their outer performance by no means came close to fulfilling the perfection the Law demanded. Their boast was not in obedience to the Law but in the mere possession of the Law, which was/is not what God was/is looking for in Kingdom people.

All of this should stop you and make you ask yourself some tough questions:

- Do I think I'm going to heaven because of my ethnic standing?
- Am I heaven bound because I'm merely religious person?
- Am I heaven bound because I am careful to perform certain religious rituals, be what they may?
- Am I heaven bound because of my religious, moral works?
- Am I a spiritual hypocrite who tells everyone else how to live for God while, in all reality, I don't practice what I preach?
- Is my life of spiritual hypocrisy causing God's holy name to be blasphemed by non-Christians who are watching me?

What's the point of the questions? To get you, like the Jews of Paul's day, to see that outer religious action cannot save, to get you to see that religious forms mean nothing to God where

salvation is concerned, and to cause you to see you are a sinner in need of the Savior, Jesus. His redemptive work is the only work which can save you, but you must turn from your works and embrace His, by faith (Eph. 2:8-10).

Moving away from religious works is, however, a hard thing to do. We learn this much from what Paul says next to his fictional Jewish opponent:

<sup>25</sup> For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law;

Stop right there.

God commanded Abraham to use circumcision as the sign of His covenant with the patriarch (Gen. 17:9-14) and ultimately his Jewish descendants. In this respect, the command of circumcision was good; however, it did not mean it possessed salvific value. The Jews did believe it had redemptive value as we read in ancient Jewish book called Jubilees:

And anyone who is born whose own flesh is not circumcised on the eighth day is not from the sons of the covenant which the LORD made for Abraham since (he is) from the children of destruction. And there is therefore no sign upon him so that he might belong to the LORD because (he is destined) to be destroyed and annihilated from the earth and to be uprooted from the earth because he has broken the covenant of the LORD our God (Jub. 15.26).

To be circumcised was to be saved, to use NT terminology, and to be uncircumcised was to be unsaved. Hence, it didn't matter how you behaved as a Jewish man so long as you had this covenantal sign.

Paul debunked this false religious notion with these eye-brow raising remarks:

but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. <sup>26</sup> So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? <sup>27</sup> 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?

According to Paul, the only way circumcision could possibly save is if an adherent actually obeyed the Law of Moses . . . that means all of it all of the time (Gal. 5:3). Regarding this thought, Thomas Schriener helpfully states,

The only way for sins to be forgiven, now that Christ has come, is through the death of Christ. Thus those who *now* adhere to the Mosaic covenant have no means to obtain forgiveness of sins, for the OT sacrifices are now passé. The only means of atonement is the cross of Christ. Old Testament believers, however, were saved in the same way as NT believers, in the sense that they exercised the obedience that comes from faith. Salvation has always been by faith, but now the fulfillment has come of what the OT promised.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, vol. 6, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 138.

How true. How earth shattering for Jew who prided himself in the Law and in the rite of circumcision. What God was and is looking for is *absolute* obedience from those who desire to know Him. When they realize their obedience will never secure salvation because they are sinners, then they will hopefully see the need to place their faith in the person and work of Jesus.

What happens when that Jew or Gentile realizes their outer work(s) will never please an absolutely holy God? What happens when they see that Jesus fulfills the mandate of the Law by living a perfect, holy life?

<sup>28</sup> For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. <sup>29</sup> 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.

The real Jew is the one who does not have a physical circumcision but an inward, spiritual one that comes from the Holy Spirit. This is what God really wanted in the Old Testament times, as He said through the pen of Moses: *“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”* (Deut. 30). His people, on the contrary, only ever wanted to focus on the outer trappings of religion so they could look spiritual while being free to live godless, carnal lives. Ezekiel says this much in chapter 33:

<sup>30</sup> “But as for you, son of man, your fellow citizens who talk about you by the walls and in the doorways of the houses, speak to one another, each to his brother, saying, ‘Come now and hear what the message is which comes forth from the LORD.’ <sup>31</sup> “They come to you as people come, and sit before you as My people and hear your words, but they do not do them, for they do the lustful desires *expressed* by their mouth, *and* their heart goes after their gain. <sup>32</sup> “Behold, you are to them like a sensual song by one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument; for they hear your words but they do not practice them (Ezek. 33).

How much they are like people today who hide behind religious form(s) while rejecting the work of Jesus on the cross. Is that you?

What is the true circumcision Paul speaks about? It is the cutting away of the sinful nature which dominated the believer prior to faith in Jesus the ultimate Jew, as Paul states in Colossians 2:

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ (Col. 2).

This circumcision does not rely on man’s religious works but upon the redemptive work of Jesus. Those who believe in the redemptive work of Jesus, regardless of whether they are Jew or Gentile, receive the eschatological redemptive circumcision Ezekiel prophesied about (Ezek. 36:26).

What about you? Will you be surprised on Judgement Day because your salvation rested on the outer form of religion? Will Jesus say He doesn’t know you because you loved ritual,

liturgy, ceremony, and religious laws? Or will Jesus welcome you into His heavenly abode because you came to Him on His terms which are all about faith in Jesus?