

Using the Law Lawfully (2:17-22)

How God Honored the Jews (2:17-21a)

2:17 *But if you bear the name “Jew”
and rely upon the Law
and boast in God,
2:18 and know His will
and approve the things that are essential,
being instructed out of the Law,
2:19 and are confident that you yourself
are a guide to the blind,
a light to those who are in darkness,
2:20 a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature,
having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge
and of the truth,
2:21a You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself?*

- “You.” Paul now addresses the members of the Roman Church who are Jewish.¹ The fact that Paul speaks this way to people claiming to be Christian shows the great need for the Gospel in the Roman Church.
- The name “Jew” is shorthand for “Judean,” a member of the tribe of Judah.²

Not Practicing What They Preached (2:21b,22)

2:21b *You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? 2:22 You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?*

¹ He previously spoke directly to the recipients of the letter in 1:1-15 and 2:1-5. After 2:17-29 he won’t speak second person again until chapter 6.

² This “nickname” occurs first in 2 Kings 16:6. With the fall of the northern ten tribes of Israel in 722 B.C., only Judah (and much-smaller Benjamin) was left. From that time to the time of the New Testament, all Israelites, regardless of their actual tribal family, were considered “Judeans,” or “Jews.”

- Stealing is prohibited in the eighth commandment (Exodus 20:15//Deuteronomy 5:19).
- Adultery is prohibited in the seventh commandment (Exodus 20:14//Deuteronomy 5:18).
- The abhorrence of idols is a reference to the second commandment (Exodus 20:4-6//Deuteronomy 5:8-10). What does Paul mean by the question, “do you rob temples?”
 - Paul’s statement could be an allusion to a famous incident where a Jew living in Rome swindled a wealthy woman by claiming he was raising money for the Jerusalem Temple – all Jews were kicked out of Rome for it for a time.³
 - The prophet Malachi condemns the post-exilic Jews of “swindling” God by offering inferior sacrifices (1:6-14) and “robbing” God by not paying the tithe (3:8-12). Jesus’ condemnation that the religious leaders “devour widows’ houses”

³ “...there was a man who was a Jew...living in Rome, [professing] to instruct men in the wisdom of the laws of Moses. He procured three other men, entirely of the same character with himself to be his partners. These men persuaded Fluvia, a woman of great dignity, and one that embraced the Jewish religion, to send purple and gold to the temple at Jerusalem; and, when they had gotten them, they employed them for their own uses, and spent the money themselves...whereupon [the Roman Emperor], who had been informed of the thing by Saturninius, the husband of Fluvia, who desired inquiry might be made about it, ordered all the Jews to be banished out of Rome” (Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.5 [81-83]). This might be the banishment referenced in Acts 18:2. Also, remember that the town clerk of Ephesus, in defending Paul, said, “these men...are neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of our goddess” (Acts 19:37). The reputation could have been that this is what Jews did (because of the incident in Rome).

(Matthew 23:14//Mark 12:40//Luke 20:47)
could mean that they were keeping money
meant for benevolence; we do know they
loved money.⁴

- Paul is also following the order of Psalm 50, where the LORD summons His covenant people to judge them:
*“What right have you to tell of My statutes
And to take My covenant in your mouth?
...when you see a **thief**, you are pleased with him,
And you associate with **adulterers**...
...he who offers a **sacrifice** of thanksgiving honors
Me”* (Psalm 50:16-18,23a).
- Even if most Jews were not guilty of external violation of these commandments, remember that the New Testament says God considers internal violations of His commandments: lust is adultery (Matthew 5:27,28) and greed is idolatry (Colossians 3:5). Even broader than this, though, is the fact that the seventh and eighth commandment are summed up in the greatest commandment: *“Love your neighbor as yourself”* (Romans 13:9, quoting Leviticus 19:18). Not loving our neighbor puts us in violation of the second tablet of the commandments, including the seventh and eighth. Why? Break one command of God’s, and you’re guilty of them all. READ James 2:8-12.

God’s Reputation (2:23,24)

Boasting Leading to Vanity (2:23)

^{2:23}You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God?

- Just as the Gentiles *“suppress the truth”* (1:18) of their knowledge of God from creation (1:20) and do *“not*

⁴ Matthew 23:16,17; Luke 16:14.

honor Him as God or give thanks” (1:21), the Jews dishonor God by disobeying the Law He gave them.

- This verse takes up the theme of 2:17b. Those who in 2:17b were said to *“rely on the Law”* are now said to be *“breaking the Law.”* Those who in 2:17b were said to *“boast in God”* are now said to *“dishonor God.”*

Opposite of Intended Results (2:24)

^{2:24}For “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,” just as it is written.

- The phrase *“just as it is written”* refers to the Old Testament. Remember that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was *“promised beforehand through [God’s] prophets in the holy Scriptures”* (1:2).
- *“Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went. I will vindicate the holiness of My great name which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord,” declares the Lord God, “when I prove Myself holy among you in their sight”’* (Ezekiel 36:22,23).⁵

Truly the Covenant People (2:25-29)

⁵ Isaiah 52:3-5 is usually cited as the text Paul is quoting, but the Ezekiel 36:23 passage fits Paul’s message far more exactly. An interesting study is all the times the LORD takes action for His own name’s sake in Ezekiel: 20:9,14,22,39; 36:20-23; 39:7,25; 43:7,8. What is the first petition of the “Lord’s Prayer” (Matthew 6:9// Luke 11:2)? If His name is a priority in His actions, is it in ours? If Jesus tells us to pray first for the Father’s name’s holiness, is it our first prayer request? Is neglect in this area a violation of the third commandment (Exodus 20:7//Deuteronomy 5:11)?

Empty Signs (2:25)

2:25 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.

- This mark of the old covenant is the last obstacle to the Gospel Paul dismantles.⁶ The transition from the old covenant to the new covenant caused a lot of growing pains in the Church. The first Church Council was called because of the believing Jews’ insistence that Christians must have the old covenant sign (Acts 15:1,5). But even *they* couldn’t keep the Law! Peter said, “*why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?*” (15:10).
- Those bearing the covenant mark should live like they are in the covenant. Under the old covenant, those bearing the mark of circumcision were to live like they were under that covenant.

God’s Determination (2:26)

2:26 So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?

- If the non-Jew keeps God’s Law, God regards this person as a part of the covenant, even if they don’t have the covenant sign. Paul is speaking of believing non-

⁶ “...the Rabbi Menachem, in his Commentary on the Books of Moses, fol. 43, col. 3, says, ‘Our Rabbis have said, that no circumcised man will see hell.’ In the Jalkut Rubeni, num. 1, it is taught, ‘Circumcision saves from hell.’ In the Medrasch Tillim, fol. 7, col. 2, it is said, ‘God swore to Abraham, that no one who was circumcised should be sent to hell.’ In the book Akedath Jizehak, fol. 54, col. 2, it is taught that ‘Abraham sits before the gate of hell, and does not allow that any circumcised Israelite should enter there.’” Quoted from Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1972; original edition, 1935), 63.

Jews here, who are able to keep God’s Law because of the Holy Spirit Who is in them. Paul is not talking about being justified by Law-keeping, since this is impossible (Romans 3:20; Galatians 2:16).

- In Christ, the barrier between non-Jew and Jew is torn down.⁷ “*Circumcision [being Jewish] is nothing, and uncircumcision [being non-Jewish] is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God*” (1 Corinthians 7:19).

Witnesses on the Day of Judgment (2:27)

2:27 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?

- Compare this to the testimony of the Queen of the south (Matthew 12:42) and the men of Nineveh from the days of Jonah (Luke 11:32).

Who Are the Real Jews (2:28,29)?

2:28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. 2:29 But he is a Jew who is one

⁷ READ Galatians 3:1-29; Ephesians 2:11-22. God has one people, and they are His people only through faith in His Son. Ephesians 2:11-22 is an incredible description of the unity of Jew and Gentile believers in Christ. Paul begins by addressing the Gentile believers in the Ephesian Church: “...remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called ‘Uncircumcision’ by the so-called ‘Circumcision,’ which is performed in the flesh by human hands...” Paul contrasts their condition prior to Christ (2:12) with the union they now have with believing Jews in Christ (2:13-19). While they were previously “*excluded from the commonwealth of Israel,*” they are now “*fellow citizens with the saints.*” Gentiles who believe in the Jewish Messiah (Jesus) for salvation have been added to the true Israel (Jews who believe in Jesus). This was prophesied by Noah at the beginning of the Book: “*Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem [father of the Jews]...may God enlarge Japheth [father of the non-Jews], and let him dwell in the tents of Shem*” (Genesis 9:26,27).

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.

False Jews (2:28)

- Paul will make a very similar argument in his warning to the believers in Philippi:
READ Philippians 3:2-4.⁸

The Spirit’s Marking of the Heart (2:29)

- God’s “circumcising,” or marking for covenant relationship, the heart is promised repeatedly in the Old Testament:
 - “...*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...and you shall again obey the LORD, and observe all His commandments which I command you today*” (Deuteronomy 30:6,8).
 - “*Behold, days are coming...when I will make a new covenant...I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it*” (Jeremiah 31:31-33).
 - “...*I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them*” (Ezekiel 11:19,20).
READ also 36:26,27 for a parallel.
 - Notice that every one of the promises of God to “circumcise the heart” is accompanied

⁸ I believe Paul’s teaching on true and false Jews to be key to understanding the Revelation’s description of those “*who say they are Jews and are not*” (2:9; 3:9).

by a renewed obedience from the heart to God’s commandments. He does not touch our hearts and leave our lives contrary to His will.

- While physical circumcision was the covenant sign under the old covenant, water baptism is the covenant sign in the new covenant (Colossians 2:11-13).
- **True Jews are those, no matter their ethnicity, who have received the Holy Spirit by faith in Jesus Christ.**
- “*Praise*” is a play on words only a Jew would catch: in Hebrew, “Judah” (יהודה) comes from the word “praise” (יָדָה).⁹ Remember that “Jew” is shorthand for “Judah.”
- The heart-circumcision of the Holy Spirit in a believer’s life enables them to do the good works of God’s Law:

The Good News

- “*‘Cursed is he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen’*” (Deuteronomy 27:26). Nobody can do all of God’s Law, and therefore we deserve the curse of the Law forever.
- “*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us*” (Galatians 3:13). Christ took our place.
- On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached this Good News of Jesus Christ to the crowd. “*They were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brethren, what shall we do?’ Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’*” (Acts 2:37,38).

⁹ See Genesis 29:35.