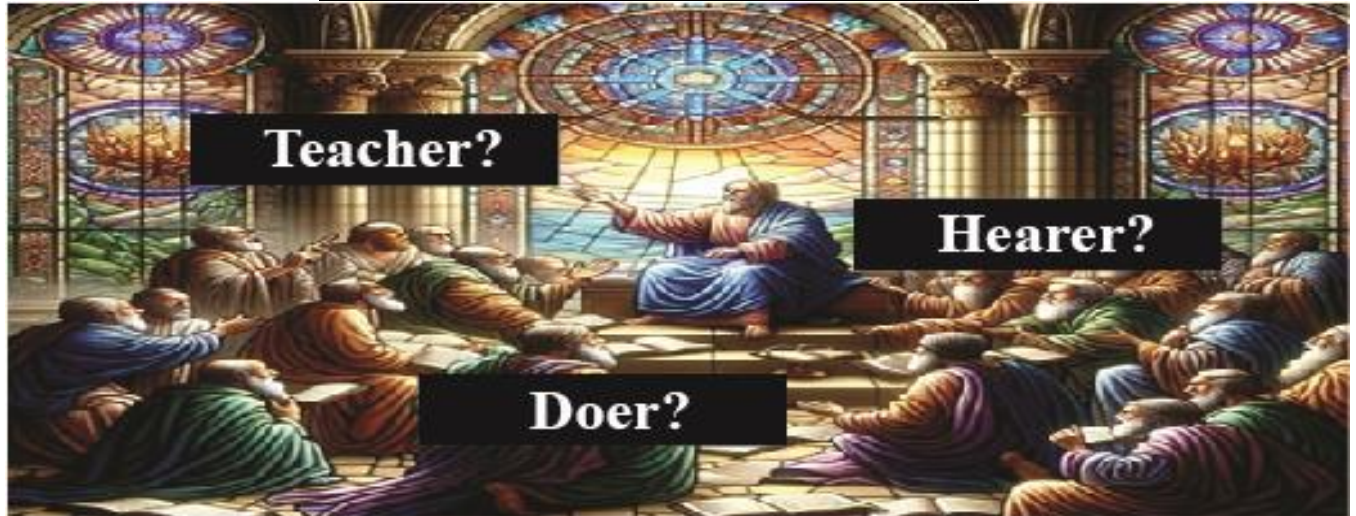


Ministry of Grace Church

Romans 2:21-29 - Sermon Notes



Background

Last time we were in the book of Romans, we talked about the fact that these Roman Christians took delight in listening to the Scriptures being read to them. But they were just “hearers” of the word. As we learned previously, the word translated “hearers” is *akroatēs*, which means “to listen to instruction without doing what is being taught,” or “to listen to something strictly for pleasure.” They weren’t particularly interested in learning from Scripture, they just liked to hear it being read. Paul is now going to get even more personal, particularly regarding those in the church who were teaching others.

Romans 2:21-23

you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the Law, through your transgression of the Law, do you dishonor God?

This, now, is where Paul starts his toe stompin’. Previously, he has been showing the Jewish Christians in Rome how privileged they were to have had the sacred Scriptures and how proud they had become because of it. Now he points out that having and teaching the Scriptures are not the same thing as obeying them.

He starts off with, “you ... who teach another, do you not teach yourself?” The implication is very clear. They were in need of the teaching just as much as those to whom they were giving the teaching. Likewise, he says, “You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal?” Again, the obvious answer is that they were guilty of doing the thing they were preaching against. He said a very similar thing just a few verses back:

For *it is* not the hearers (*akroates*) of the Law *who* are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. (Romans 2:13)

And – in his letter, James said a very similar thing:

But become doers of the word, and not merely hearers (*akroates*) who delude themselves. (James 1:22)

But now let me take a little bit of liberty with **Romans 2:13** and express it as Paul might have after having given today's verse,

For it is neither the hearers of the Scriptures nor the teachers of the Scriptures who are just before God, but the doers of the Scriptures will be justified.

It's bad enough that these Jewish converts to Christianity were more focused on listening to the reading of God's word than on doing it. It is even worse that they were teaching others the truths of God's word without practicing them themselves.

Christians have been entrusted with the sacred Word of God. By God's grace our eyes have been opened and we know that the Bible is the truth. Our commission is to share this truth with the world around us. But we must be careful that we don't simply preach and teach the truth without living it as well.

In the next verse he gets even more personal saying, "You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?"

Many of the readers, or hearers, of this letter would have said, "No, I don't commit adultery." But as Christ pointed out in His sermon on the mount,

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:27-28)

So, even though they may not have physically committed an act of adultery, in God's book they were guilty of it even if they had thought lustfully about someone of the opposite sex.

The next part of this verse is a little more difficult. It says, "You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?" According to the Jewish historian Josephus, it was not uncommon for Jews (and Christians) to destroy or desecrate temples of idolatry and then to plunder some of the riches which had been brought by idol worshippers. Even in Acts, when a couple of Paul's traveling companions were brought before a crowd in Ephesus, it was said in their defense,

"For you have brought these men *here* who are neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of our goddess. (Acts 19:37)

This shows that temple robbing was a known offense among early Christians. But that's not Paul's point. His point is that these Roman Christians were quick to tell others what was wrong, but they were just as quick to do that which they told others not to do. Recall what he said about judging back in verse one? He is saying essentially the same thing here about teaching.

The Jewish Christians in Rome believed strongly in the Law and even boasted about having received it from God and of knowing it through God's revelation. This was God honoring ... in word! At the same time, by their disobedience of the Law they caused dishonor to God ... in deed.

Even today it's fairly easy to learn the language of the Christian faith and to talk the talk. We have all met people who know all the right things to say at all the appropriate times. They can quote Scripture with ease and recite Biblical stories in excruciating detail, including the moral lessons to be learned. They are quick to demonstrate their knowledge with relevant facts and figures. In some cases, they may even be teaching a Sunday school class, helping others learn the facts. The problem comes when

these people do not demonstrate their knowledge by their actions. They don't walk the walk. As a result, instead of being a shining example of Christianity in action, they are an embarrassment to those of us who know and love the Savior, and they dishonor the God they claim to serve.

The Apostle John, in teaching what true love is all about, warned us to love in deed, not just in word:

Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. (1 John 3:18)

It's important to know what the Bible teaches, and it's particularly refreshing when we meet someone who can make Biblical truths easily understandable. It's even more important for us all to be living examples of Christianity. And remember, this applies to our attitudes as well as our actions.

Romans 2:24-25

For "The name of God is blasphemed among the gentiles because of you," just as it is written. 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.

If I were to rephrase these two verses in today's vernacular, it would be "the actions of some Christians bring shame to our God."

For the past few verses Paul has been telling the Roman Christians (and us) that talking about faith and a relationship with God means nothing unless that faith is put into practice. It doesn't matter how much we know about God and about what He expects of us if we aren't putting it into action. Now he takes it one step further. He says that not only did the Christians in Rome dishonor God by not keeping the Law, he says that they are the reason that the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles. In the Old Testament the word "Gentile" usually means a non-Jew. In the New Testament, however, it usually is a reference to those who are not Christians. It's one thing to be known as one of God's people. It's quite another to be known as one of God's people who lives such a life that God is disparaged because of you.

Paul says "just as it is written" but he does not specifically mention where it is written. The implication is that he was quoting scripture, but he recognized that these people knew the scriptures well enough that he didn't have to quote it. He may have been talking about one of the following passages:

"So now, what do I have here," declares Yahweh, "since My people have been taken away for nothing?" Yahweh declares, "Those who rule over them howl, and My name is continually blasphemed all day long. (Isaiah 52:5)

"Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says Lord Yahweh, "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, to which you have come. "I will prove the holiness of My great name which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst. ... (Ezekiel 36:22-23a)

Keep in mind that to those who are unsaved, who know we are Christians, we are God's representatives. The way we behave reflects directly on our God. What they see in us may, in fact, be all they know of God. What kind of a God do we portray?

Paul now seems to take a turn in his teaching. He has been talking about the Law for the past few verses, but now he starts talking about circumcision. As we have said earlier, the Jews took great pride in the fact that they were the people of God and that they possessed His very Words in their Scriptures. They bragged about having the Law, and they bragged about being direct descendents of Abraham. The symbol of their heritage was indicated in their circumcision. That's what marked them as sons of Abraham, so they took great pride in their circumcision.

Remember, their circumcision had nothing to do with their faith. When Abram (meaning exalted father) was ninety-nine years old, more than twenty years after he believed God and was declared righteous, God made a covenant with Him. God promised to give Abram and his descendents the entire land of Canaan as an everlasting possession, and He changed his name to Abraham (meaning father of a multitude). As a sign of the covenant, Abraham was to circumcise himself and all of his male descendents:

This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your seed after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. (Genesis 17:10-11)

Since that time all Jews have circumcised their male children as a sign of the covenant between them and God.

Paul now cautions them, however, that circumcision means nothing if they don't keep the Law (their covenant with God.) From other scripture we know that no one perfectly keeps the Law, so he was telling these Jewish Christians in Rome that their circumcision had no meaning to them whatsoever.

That must have been a tough pill to swallow for them because they put great stock in their heritage. Unfortunately, that was precisely the problem. They put their confidence in their heritage instead of their faith, in the outward symbol of their faith rather than the inward effect of their faith. Paul will deal directly with this issue later in this letter.

Romans 2:26-27

So if the uncircumcised man observes the righteous requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the Law, will he not judge you who, through the letter of the Law and circumcision, are a transgressor of the Law?

Paul now points out further that the advantage of circumcision is not in the outward appearance, but by inward faith and action. The words, "righteous requirements" are the translation of the word *dikaionata*. This word is key to understanding this verse. It refers to the righteousness that has been declared by God. Paul will tell us later that no one is justified by keeping the deeds of the Law. We will also learn that the only way to fulfill the righteousness of the law is through faith:

because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; (Romans 3:20-22)

This righteousness does not come from keeping the "ordinances" of the Law, it comes by keeping the "righteous requirements" of the Law and those righteous requirements are only kept as a result of faith. This is what the entire first part of Paul's letter to the Romans is about. Paul will clearly declare this fact later in his letter, taking it all the way back to Abraham:

For the promise to Abraham or to his seed that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. (Romans 4:13)

What Paul is saying here is, if a Gentile keeps the righteousness of the Law by faith, then he or she becomes one of God's children. This does not happen because he or she went through some bloody ceremonial surgery, but because he or she believed God and it was imputed to him or her as righteousness. The Jews' confidence was in their flesh; our confidence is in our faith in the blood of

Christ! Now, Paul appears to repeat the previous verse, but he is actually carrying it a little bit further. Here's what a literal translation of this verse says:

And the uncircumcision, which is by nature fulfilling the law, shall it not judge you who with the letter (of the Law) and circumcision (in the flesh) are a transgressor of the Law?"

We Gentiles, who satisfy the righteousness of the Law through faith, will one day judge those who, though they are circumcised, try to obtain righteousness by obeying a set of rules. Paul is telling us that we who fulfill the Law by faith will judge the Jews who try to keep the Law.

We can never be justified in God's sight by obeying all the commandments because no one can obey them all. The point Paul is building up to (which he will get to in the next chapter) is this:

as it is written, "there is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; (Romans 3:10-11)

The Christians in Rome, like their counterparts in Galatia, thought that salvation was obtained by being circumcised and keeping the Law. Paul says that isn't so.

Romans 2:28-29

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. 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.

Much of the early Christian church was composed of people who were converts from Judaism and who had been convinced, and now believed, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God. However, they were so heavily steeped in the rules and traditions of Judaism that it was hard for them to separate the legal requirements of the Jewish belief system from the basic tenet of Christianity: faith. It was equally hard for a Jewish Christian to let go of the fact that they didn't have to be a Jew before they could become a Christian. As Paul has just pointed out, being a direct descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob doesn't guarantee anything with regard to salvation.

He now gets to one of his main points. Being Jewish and having been circumcised are only external and in the flesh. They are things that can be proven and can be seen by many, but they carry no weight in God's record book. Paul tells us that the evidence of a real Jew (a chosen one of God) is not in the appearance of fleshly external things like circumcision.

There are many people who call themselves Christians today because they belong to a particular church. They think that church membership, being baptized in the church, and having learned the catechism of the church mean that they are Christians. There is more to Christianity than church membership, or even calling oneself a Christian. Interestingly enough, there was a national survey in the United States recently in which nearly 80% of the respondents claimed to be Christian, yet less than half of them indicated that they attend church regularly. But then, regular church attendance doesn't make someone a Christian either, does it? Only those who believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that He died on the cross to pay for their sins, and that He rose from the dead are really Christians.

Paul now says that the true Jew is the one who is a Jew inwardly. Remember how the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the Jews, acted? They did everything for show, so that people could see how spiritual they were. There are many Christians today whose faith is just the same way. They are the ones who are always parading their Christianity around for all to see, making a show of their good

works so that everyone can see what a good Christian they are. And people are probably saying of them, “Wow, he sure is a good Christian!” How sad is that!

Paul says that circumcision is of the heart, not in the flesh. It’s an inward attitude, not an outward action. It is the spirit of the Law that we need to obey, not the letter. If we exhibit our Christianity in order to impress the people around us then we will have what we are looking for, the praise of men. But Paul tells us that our goal is not to receive praise from men, but praise from God.

Praise from God will only come as a result of a heart that is submitted to Him and committed to doing His will. That may mean that in this life we never receive the recognition that we deserve. If we truly deserve the praise, then we will get it someday, not from men, but from God.

Here’s how Paul said it to the Galatians:

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. (*Galatians 6:7-9*)

In the final analysis, we don’t want to receive the praise of men. Instead, we want to hear:

“Well done, good and faithful servant!”

So What?

Let’s continue to proclaim God’s gospel message to the entire world, but let’s also commit to redoubling our efforts to being totally obedient to God’s Word. In fact, let’s make our obedience to God’s Word our witness to the rest of the world! These Roman Christians apparently had the attitude of, “Do as I say, not as I do.”

We who have been washed clean by the blood of Christ and who have the entire Bible at our disposal, give worship, praise, and honor to God ... in word! But do we at the same time by our sinfulness, selfishness, and lack of faith dishonor the God we love ... in deed?

We have talked repeatedly about the fact that we are not saved by our actions. We are saved (and declared righteous by God) by faith and faith alone. However, as James tells us:

But someone will say, “You have faith; and I have works. Show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” (*James 2:18*)

In other words, our works are the evidence of our faith. The real evidence of our salvation is in both our words and our deeds. However – we can’t demonstrate our faith by our words and actions unless we are completely submitted to His will?

Here’s another way of looking at it. Are you still trying to be “good enough” for God? If so, it is a futile effort. As Solomon might say, “Vanity, Vanity, it is all Vanity!” The only way to satisfy God is by faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ. And the only way to live a satisfying Christian life is by staying humbled before God. We can’t do either by works; we must do both by faith. One final question, “Which would you rather do, hear God’s Word, teach God’s Word, or live God’s Word?”

Let’s pray.