

# POTOMAC HILLS COMMUNITY CHURCH

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## *“The Grace of God in the Gospel”*

### A Series on Romans

## Romans 2.17-29, *“Legalists Need the Gospel”*

### INTRODUCTION: *“A Conversation about Hell”*<sup>1</sup>

A passage in C.S. Lewis' book The Great Divorce perfectly portrays a characteristic which I believe is common to people who reject Christ and are lost — a **misleading religious confidence**. Lewis makes this point in a fanciful conversation between a resident of Hell (who apparently doesn't know he's in Hell) and an old acquaintance who's visiting from Heaven.

After some typically British opening comments, the resident of Hell remarks that as he remembered, his old friend had gotten rather narrow-minded towards the end of his life — believing in a literal Heaven and Hell. After some time, the visitor from Heaven interjects,

“Is it possible you don't know where you've been?”

“Now that you mention it, I don't think we ever do give it a name. What do you call it?”

“We call it Hell.”

“There is no need to be profane, my dear boy. I may not be very orthodox in your sense of that word, but I do feel that these matters ought to be discussed *simply*, and *seriously*, and *reverently*.”

“Discuss Hell *reverently*? I meant what I said. You've gone to Hell.”

“Go on, my dear boy, go on. That is so like you. No doubt you'll tell me why, in your view, I was sent there.”

“But don't you know? You went there because you're an apostate.”

“Are you serious?”

“Perfectly!”

“This is worse than I expected. Do you really think people are penalized for their honest opinions? Even assuming, for the sake of argument, that those opinions were mistaken.”

Although Lewis knew from the Scriptures that no one will be in Hell without knowing he's there, this fanciful conversation perfectly captures the misleading religious confidence of the damned.

Someday untold numbers, both the small and the great, will stand before the Christ as Judge; at first disbelieving they're really there. Jesus himself made this clear in **Matthew 7:22-23**, *“On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'”*

Perhaps it is difficult to think that earnest, sincere religious people will be lost, but Scripture indicates that this is indeed the case. Moreover, some who will be judged come from

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<sup>1</sup> Introductory story is adapted from The Great Divorce by C. S. Lewis, pages 38-39. Ed Welch quote is taken from his article, *“Is Biblical-Nouthetic Counseling Legalistic?”* in The Journal for Pastoral Practice, vol. XI, no. 1, 1992, pages 4-21, republished in The Journal of Biblical Counseling CD-Rom.

among orthodox people who subscribe to the Apostle's Creed and can repeat the Nicene Creed:

*I Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ  
The Only Begotten Son of God  
Begotten of Him before all ages  
God of God, Light of Light  
Very God of Very God ...*

Some who believe in the inerrancy of Scripture — some who would fight to the last for the truthfulness of the Bible — will be lost!

Why? Because they have been lulled by a false religious security which has prevented them from getting to the heart of the matter. Perhaps some of these will even hear these words.

Begin with a question ... "Can a Person Be Too Religious?"

On one hand, the question seems to imply a 'Yes' answer. Certainly some people, the question seems to say, are too religious. So let's make the question more personal. Is it possible that you're too religious? That's a horse of a different color. It takes the question out of the theoretical and forces you to think of your own experience.

The answer may be "Yes." You **may** be too religious for your own good.

I mean, we've all known people who seemed to be so religious that they were intolerable to be around. They were devoted, pious, obedient, sincere — and absolutely unbearable.

Of course that could never apply to any of us. ... Or could it?

About 25 years ago Fritz Ridenour published a very popular paperback with the intriguing title How to Be a Christian Without Being Religious. Well over 100,000 copies were sold, attesting to the fact that many people realize that being a Christian and being religious are two different things.

- It is possible to be a Christian without being religious.
- It is possible to be religious without being a Christian.

By the way, can you guess what the book was really about?

It was about the book of Romans! No kidding.

The burden of the book was to conclusively show that being a Christian doesn't mean becoming a holier-than-thou religious person. Nowhere in the Bible is that point made more powerfully than in the book of Romans. And nowhere in Romans is that truth demonstrated more clearly than in our text this morning — **Romans 2:17-29**. Here we have the antidote to such self-deception, where Paul warns religious people like us to guard ourselves from the dangers of a **false religious confidence**.

In the early chapters of Romans Paul is laboring to show the universal guilt of mankind. In rapid succession, he takes up the case of various groups and shows how each one is truly guilty before God. At the end of chapter two he comes to the third group ...

- The first group was Gentiles. People who take license with sin to the extreme. And it's a pretty contemporary description. We saw that in Romans 1:18-32.
- The second group was Moralists. People who think they're good enough. We saw that in Romans 2:1-16.
- The third group was Jews (or as I'm calling them today – Legalists). People who take pride in their own righteousness, their own works, their own religion. And we see that here in Romans 2:17-29.

One of the oldest tensions in the Christian life is between license (Romans 1) and legalism (Romans 2). Edward Welch, the Director of Counseling at the Christian Counseling &

Educational Foundation in Philadelphia, accurately describes this ongoing battle for people between license and legalism. He says ...

“On the one hand license beckons. Many Christians live morally careless and unashamedly self-centered versions of being a Christian. Many teachers teach cheap grace, distorting the true Gospel of the Savior Who is our Lord. Licentious church life is careless about discipleship; it nourishes self-indulgence rather than self-denial. License downplays God's rule; it exalts the desires of the flesh for pleasure, power, autonomous freedom, love, and the like.

The flesh opposes God's law and lives to do what it wants.

On the other hand legalism crushes. Many Christians live overly scrupulous, compulsive versions of being a Christian. Many teachers teach graceless distortions of the true Gospel of the Lord Who is our Savior. Legalistic church life is authoritarian and misguided about discipleship; it nourishes allegiance to manmade codes and standards as the proof of salvation. Legalism downplays God's grace; it exalts the desires of the flesh for self-righteous performance, perfectionism, self-atonement, and judgmentalism. The flesh opposes the gospel of God and lives to perform up to standards of human making.

Christians frequently oscillate between living as careless sinners and living as compulsive Pharisees. You probably know Christians who are casual about holiness, self-absorbed, who view God as the “errand boy of their wandering desires.” You probably know Christians who are obsessed with their own version of holiness, absorbed with their own and others' successes and failures in self-discipline, who view God as a taskmaster who must be pleased. You probably know Christians who embody some of both: they view the Christian life as legalism they can't live up to, so they give up trying and live for license.

[Preaching, Teaching, and] Counseling that follows the Scripture will address both legalism and license. Wise pastoral counsel proclaims the love and grace of God in Christ, which, when received by faith, produces obedience.

So let's take a look at these legalists.

But before we do, very quickly, let's remind ourselves of ...

### **CONTEXT: *The Significance of the Roman Epistle* <sup>2</sup>**

The book of Romans speaks to us today just as powerfully as in the first century, most of all; it **profoundly brings the knowledge of God Himself ... to us**. My goal, however, is not merely to increase your knowledge. Knowledge is important, but it's never the final purpose of reading and hearing the Bible. My ultimate goal is that your life might be **changed** as a result of studying God's Word. That's what we want as we study this book. Remember, this is God's Word to you. Every word is for you! Every word applies to you! This is God's Word for Potomac Hills in 2004. In the words of Francis Schaeffer, this is "true truth." Romans **IS** all about the world the way it really is.

As we turn to the book of Romans, we begin by searching for the theme of the book. We don't have to look far to find it. Look at verse 16, “*For I'm not ashamed of the gospel, for it's the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*” Verse 17 adds an explanation, “*For in it [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it's written, "The righteous shall live by faith."*”

What is the theme of the book?

**The Gospel.**

What is Paul writing about?

**The Gospel.**

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<sup>2</sup> Most of the Context is adapted from *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Romans 1-8*, by John MacArthur, pages ix-xxii; and the sermon, “To Rome With Love,” by Ray Pritchard, Calvary Memorial Church, Oak Park, IL, 1/5/92.

What is the key word of Romans? **The Gospel.**

This is what the book of Romans is all about. If you don't grasp this, the rest of the book will make little sense to you. And you best grasp it ... since we're going to be here for awhile. It's the essence of Paul's theology. It's the reason he wants to come to Rome. More than that, it's the heart of evangelical theology.

Romans is all about the Gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ and the difference He can make when He comes into your life. In fact, the English word Gospel comes from the Old English godspell, which means good tidings, or as we would say, good news. Romans is about **the Gospel, God's Good News.**

This series on Romans is a golden opportunity to really understand what Christianity is all about. We're moving slowly so that you can think and study and read and discuss and review and check things out and pray over what you hear. Let's open this book, but as always, do it carefully, as it may change your life ...

I'm not going to read the passage now, but as we go through it ...

There are three major warnings in this passage, and the first, covered in verses 17-20, is this ...

#### **v. 17-20: WARNING 1 – POSSESSION WITHOUT PRESUMPTION**<sup>3</sup>

Paul underlines two principal dangers here.

The first is the danger of thinking we're okay because we possess the truth. This, of course, was the great danger for the religious-minded Jew of Bible times. Every Jew realized that in respect to the truth he was privileged far above the rest of the people on the earth. Paul insightfully describes this sense of privilege in **Romans 2:17-18**, "*But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God [18] and know His will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; ...*"

In this one sentence the apostle notes that their sense of privilege had three main aspects:

##### **1. Their Name**

"*If you call yourself a Jew.*" That was always first. The Jews always knew they were God's Chosen People. The name "Jew," which means "praise to Jehovah" reminded them that they were privileged among all the people of the world. They were the "People of the Covenant." To them was committed the ancient Law of God. The Torah was theirs; the prophets belonged to them, as did the poets and the kings. Moses was theirs, and so was Abraham—the father of the nation. No wonder that when Jews introduced themselves, they often added the word "Jew" after their name: "Simon Bar-Jonah, Jew."

They bragged regarding God. Boasting in God can be good if it is for the right reason, but they were boasting because of their being God's favorites, the true people of God.

First was their name. Second was ...

##### **2. Their Book**

"*But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God [18] and know His will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; ...*" Here was the point that forever set the Jews apart from the surrounding nations. The Greeks might have Plato and Aristotle, but the Jews had the law of God. No one could top that. God had written it with His finger on Mount Sinai. How much better could it get? Compared to that, the writings of the Greeks seemed like illiterate scribbling.

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<sup>3</sup> The exposition of the text is adapted from the message "Can A Person Be Too Religious," by Ray Pritchard, 3/8/92 and Preaching the Word: Romans by Kent Hughes, pages 61-69.

They relied upon the **possession** of the Law (the Torah) as giving them a unique standing before God. The thought here is not that they saw their special status coming from **living** by the Torah, but simply from **possessing** it.

No wonder the Jews bragged about the law. Not only did they have the law, they were instructed in the law. But that's not all. Because the Jews had the law of God, they knew God's will in a way the Romans and Greeks never knew it. They prided themselves on knowing His revealed will, derived from the Ten Commandments and other Old Testament Scriptures. They knew what was right and what was wrong. And they didn't mind telling everyone else about it.

Their name, their book, and third ...

### 3. Their Works<sup>4</sup>

**Romans 2:19-20**, "...and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, [20] an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—

Paul lists here four claims the Jews made for themselves:

- Guide to the blind
- Light to those in the darkness
- Instructor of the foolish
- Teacher of children

Those are pretty heavy claims to make for yourself. Note that Paul never contradicts them. All of them are good if used in the right way. After all, the blind needs guides and the foolish need instructors. Certainly children need teachers. That's what the Jews claimed to be.

The claim was perfectly respectable. The performance was something else entirely. They prided themselves on being able to make superior moral judgments. They were far beyond the ignorant Gentiles!

And that's where Paul aims his biggest salvo. If you widen the lens to take in all three advantages, they are all **outward** — A name, a book and a series of good works. None of those things touch the heart, and since they don't touch the heart, they can all be faked. They require no **real** inward change.

Without a change of heart, the Jewish advantage turns out to be no advantage at all! These things were wonderful privileges. But as wonderful as they were, they had a deluding effect on the Jews. When they compared their enlightenment with the abysmal theological ignorance of the Gentiles they looked very good. Of course they were acceptable to God!

Today we recognize their spiritual blindness. But the blade cuts both ways, doesn't it? The sword that pierces the heart of the religious Jew pierces ours as well. It's easy to imagine we're okay because we know so much more about the Bible than the average person on the street, especially in this day and age of Biblical illiteracy. We can read the Bible in twenty-five versions if we want. Some of us even carry around Bibles that have as many as eight parallel translations. It's a great temptation for the pastor to imagine that, as he struts to the pulpit carrying Hebrew in one hand and the Greek in the other, he's okay, when in fact he might just have a heart of stone.

We know God's revealed will (the Bible) so well. We can find a verse **for everything**. Ultimately, it can become very easy to imagine, as we look at the world all around us that we have a patent on the truth of God — we're okay! May God open our eyes as often as they need

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<sup>4</sup> A small part of this section dealing with Luke 18 and the Pharisee's self-righteousness comes from the article, "Opening Blind Eyes," by Paul David Tripp, CCEF, *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, vol. 14, no. 2, Winter 1996, pages 6-11.

to be opened.

Finally, this delusion from privilege and possession can lead to the deadly pride of **arrogant presumption**. Presumption can make you insufferable. That's what it did to the Jews. They fancied themselves guides — lights — instructors — teachers — and so they looked down with condescension and scorn on the unwashed. The Gentiles sensed this and resented it. The ancient historian Tacitus said, "Among themselves their honesty is inflexible, their compassion quick to move, but to all other persons they show the hatred of antagonism." The very privileges which should have produced accepting, loving kindness produced arrogant, loveless egotists instead!

And again, the sword cuts both ways because those who hold the truth of the Gospel often become this way as well. Presumption upon possession of God's truth can breed a self-righteous, self-centered, self-deceived stuffed shirt.

Again, let me quote Ed Welch, "The Apostle Paul's indignation arose from his insight into the legalistic heart. The implicit assumption of legalism is that we actually have some innate righteousness, as if we were morally weak rather than incorrigible rebels who need grace. Although it is subtle and sometimes very religious looking, there is a deep arrogance in the legalistic heart. As such, it is not surprising that the Apostle Paul harshly denounced legalism. Because of Paul's understanding of the hopelessness of sin's corruption and his appreciation for Jesus' once-for-all atonement, he could not tolerate the pride that presumes we can work for our righteousness. He made it clear that a foundation of Christ and our own works was no foundation at all and was simply a euphemism for self-righteousness."

Paul Tripp, also of the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation, writes about the self-righteousness of the Pharisees, "The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was not enough because it was not righteousness. It was ugly, prideful, human **self-righteousness**. This kind of righteousness always emphasizes what is humanly doable and ignores what can only be accomplished through the bountiful streams of the grace of Christ.

Perhaps this is the epicenter of spiritual blindness. At its core, to be spiritually blind means to think you are righteous when really you aren't. This makes the grace of God and the obligation to change non-issues. If I'm righteous (so I think), I don't need Christ and I don't need change. This is clearly demonstrated in Luke 18 with the story of the two men in the temple. Jesus said, **Luke 18:9-13**, "*He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: [10] 'Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. [11] The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. [12] I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' [13] But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'*"

The Pharisee stood in the temple and told God that he didn't need Him. He was there to announce that he was okay, distancing himself from the tax-collecting sinner and listing his "acts of righteousness" before the Lord. Whenever a follower of Christ feels superior to others, he should watch out, for that attitude is not a sign of God's grace. To come into a position of spiritual privilege only to succumb to self-righteous arrogance indicates that your soul is in great danger. Our familiarity with holy things must never give way to **spiritual presumption**.

I remember once when I was pastoring in Alabama. There was a couple in town whom I had married and the husband called because his wife had gotten very sick and was in the

hospital. I had visited with her and had given her a Bible. I went back a few days later and she began to talk very excitedly about something she had read. She said something to the effect of ... “I was reading in the Bible you gave me and I read this great story about this man’s son who took his inheritance and blew it all. And finally, after running out of money, he went home. And his father took him back! Can you believe that! Not only did he take the stupid kid back, but he threw him a huge party! That’s amazing. Isn’t that a great story? Have you ever read that story before?”

And I assured her that yes, as a matter of fact, I had read that story before, and I agreed with her that it was a great story. It is so cool when you see people getting a glimpse of the grace of God for the first time. You know, that’s the way it ought to be for each one of us!

There is great danger for those of us who take for granted the wisdom and power of God and His Word. To those who have succumbed to the pride of privilege and presumption, Paul asks some penetrating questions. These questions are good therapy for all of us. Because they were meant to humble his hearers, they were asked in such a way that they demanded agreement.

**v. 21-24: WARNING 2 – PROCLAMATION WITHOUT PERFORMANCE**

**Romans 2:21-23**, “... *you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? [22] You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? [23] You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.*”

Many of the Jewish teachers and leaders were guilty of these offenses — and it was common knowledge. Everyone knew of cases where the most orthodox had left loopholes in their business dealings for a little “refined stealing.” And while they abhorred idolatry and the dishonor of God, they had robbed God’s Temple by profaning sacred things, committing, “subtle forms of sacrilege.” Even if they had not done these things overtly, spiritually they were still guilty! Thus, in just a few sentences Paul does away with the false security which they could derive from having the truth. They were **not** okay. Their lives didn’t measure up to the truth they possessed.

Note the five questions Paul asks:

1. *"You then who teach others, do you not teach yourself?"*

Answer: Yes, the Jews were good at telling other people what to do, but when it came to living up to their own standards, they failed miserably.

2. *"While you preach against stealing, do you steal?"*

Answer: Yes, the very people who preached against stealing robbed widow's houses.

3. *"You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?"*

Answer: Yes, and as a whole host of former preacher’s can testify, it’s easier to preach against immorality than it is to stay out of trouble yourself.

4. *"You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?"*

Answer: Yes, the very people who claimed to hate idolatry were consorting with temple prostitutes.

And though the last one is really a statement, “*You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.*” Let’s turn it into our 5<sup>th</sup> question ...

5. *"You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?"*

Answer: Yes, and it's always worse when religious people act like hypocrites because then the name of God is blasphemed.

What's the point? Religious people are good at telling other people what to do.

Unfortunately, they often do the very things they condemn in others. That was the Jewish disadvantage. Not that they knew God's law, not that they claimed to teach others, but that they didn't live up to what they claimed to believe. But what do you call people who say one thing and do another? Hypocrites. No charge would have been more reprehensible to the Jews than the charge of religious hypocrisy, but that's exactly what Paul is saying in these verses.

Paul ends his cross-examination with a harsh accusation, **Romans 2:24**, "*For, as it is written, "The name of God is **blasphemed** among the Gentiles because of you."*"

That's a quotation from Isaiah 52:5. What an indictment. You claim to be a teacher of the Gentiles, but because of your hypocrisy God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles. Blasphemy was the ultimate because it involved deliberately dragging God's name into the mud. That's what the Jews were doing by saying one thing and doing another.

Not only do they **not** measure up to their privilege and presumption in having the truth, but they disgrace it! The sacred name of God which none of these religious Jews would ever repeat with his own mouth was because of them actually blasphemed by the Gentiles with whom they associated.

Nathan, after confronting David with his sin, said, **2 Samuel 12:14**, "*But you have given the enemies of the Lord great opportunity to despise and blaspheme Him...*" (NLT)

We have all, unfortunately, heard the name of God blasphemed by unbelievers because of immoral actions by those who claim to be believers. We may assume that because we have the truth we're okay, but that's a dangerous presumption. God's not impressed by our claims of orthodoxy, and neither is the world. What *does* impress God and the world is an orthodoxy which produces a new life — an orthodoxy of action.

Someone once said to Charles Spurgeon, the great English preacher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, "The Bible is the light of the world." Spurgeon objected, saying, "How can that be? The world never reads the Bible." He went on to say, "The Bible is the light of the church and the church is the light of the world. The world reads the Christian, not the Bible."

Warning #1: Possession without presumption.

Warning #2: Proclamation without performance. And third ...

#### v. 25-27: **WARNING 3 – RITUAL WITHOUT REALITY**

There is another danger, a natural twin to the danger of thinking we're acceptable to God because we have the truth: namely, thinking we're right before the Lord because we're affiliated with His people. The Jews thought they were secure because they were part of God's chosen people through circumcision. They believed circumcision somehow secured salvation.

Our primary problem in approaching this passage is that circumcision doesn't mean to us what it meant to the Jews. To us, circumcision is a purely optional physical act performed on young baby boys. Some are circumcised; some aren't. Outside of the Jewish faith, few people are circumcised for religious reasons. Most undergo the procedure for hygienic reasons.

But to the Jews circumcision was a holy mark on the body, a physical reminder to the Jewish male that he belonged exclusively to God. God gave circumcision to Abraham and to his descendants as a sign and seal of the sacred relationship that existed between God and the Jewish people.

Note this carefully: Circumcision—although it was a physical mark on the body—was never meant to be an end in itself. The physical mark was meant to be accompanied by a deep spiritual commitment to God. Where commitment was absent, circumcision soon degenerated into a mere ritual. And that's roughly what happened over the centuries. By the first century

many rabbis spoke of circumcision as if it were an automatic ticket to heaven. One writer said, "Circumcision saves from hell." Circumcision had become the supreme symbol of Jewish superiority! A man need only to be circumcised to insure his place in heaven.

The rite of circumcision was a beautiful thing. When originally given to Abraham, it was a public testimony of his commitment to God. Paul says in **Romans 4:11** that "*He [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.*"

This signified that all of his life was God's and was meant to signify this among his descendants. It was something like a wedding ring between God and His people. Yet, Paul says that circumcision will **not** justify a man before God, **Romans 2:25**, "*For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.*" Or, as the New Living has it, "*The Jewish ceremony of circumcision is worth something only if you obey God's law. But if you don't obey God's law, you are no better off than an uncircumcised Gentile.*"

Circumcision was of great value if one understood and lived its intended significance. However, if its meaning was disregarded, it was as meaningless as a wedding ring on an adulterer's finger. Faith gave circumcision its reality.

Paul continues by logically turning to the other side of the coin, **Romans 2:26-27**, "*So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? [27] Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law.*"

Paul is not exactly saying that uncircumcised Gentiles can keep the Law, but rather that if they do they will be reckoned as circumcised. Moreover, they then could be called to bear witness in judgment against the circumcised that have broken the Law. Paul's argument was devastating! One of the greatest insults in Judaism was to call another Jew "uncircumcised," and this is exactly what Paul had done in no uncertain terms. Again, the Jews would find these ideas shocking. The first point they could accept because it was similar to some of the things the prophets said about circumcising the heart. The notion that outward obedience must be accompanied by a repentant heart is not a particularly New Testament idea. But the second point would be **totally unacceptable** because it basically implies that a man might be accepted by God without ever being circumcised. Orthodox Jews would violently object to such teaching.

But Paul was adamant. **Circumcision alone doesn't justify a man.** His actions must be in keeping with his profession of faith.

In applying this to ourselves, all we have to do is substitute for the word "circumcision" any of the following: Church membership — baptism — confirmation — Presbyterian — and so on. The great mistake of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews when asked about their relationship to God is to cite their religious affiliation as evidence of their relationship.

"Are you a believer?" "Of course. I've been going to church for 25 years."

"Are you a believer?" "Of course. I'm a Catholic!"

"Are you a believer?" "Of course. I was baptized right here in this Church."

There are as many answers as there are affiliations and rites, but none will convince God — they're all outward circumcisions.

In conclusion Paul takes us to ...

#### **v. 28-29: THE HEART OF THE MATTER**

**Romans 2:28-29**, "*For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision*

*outward and physical. [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."*

I like the rendering of this verse by Donald Grey Barnhouse, who said, "For he's not a Christian who's one outwardly, nor is that "church membership" which is outward in the flesh; but he's a Christian who's one inwardly; and "church membership" is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter, whose praise is not of men, but of God."

It is so easy to be self-deceived by our familiarity with the truth and/or our religious affiliations. But God's not fooled at all. God is never fooled. The truth is, earnest, confident, religious people will ultimately be lost. Some who believe the creeds implicitly and mouth untarnished orthodoxy will be told, "*Depart from me, I never knew you.*"

We all need to go to the heart of the matter. The Old Testament recognized that circumcision was a matter of the heart. Moses said to his people, **Deuteronomy 30:6**, "*And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.*"

The New Testament also describes a true believer in terms of inner circumcision, **Colossians 2:9-11**, "*For in Christ the fullness of God lives in a human body, and you are complete through your union with Christ. He is the Lord over every ruler and authority in the universe. When you came to Christ, you were "circumcised," but not by a physical procedure. It was a spiritual procedure—the cutting away of your sinful nature.*"

We must each consider the question, "Where does our confidence lie?"

Does it rest either on our knowledge of God's Word or our religious affiliation? If so, we're deluded. Mankind without Christ is hopelessly lost. That is true of pagan man, true of the moral man, and now it is clear of the religious man. All men and all women are hopelessly lost until they come to Jesus Christ. It's not a question of whether you've been baptized, sanforized, sanitized or pasteurized. The only question that matters is, "Do you receive and rest in Christ alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?"

True salvation is a matter of the heart, **Romans 10:9-10**, "*because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.*"

God's Word is surgical. It is **meant** to pierce hearts.

May God's Word pierce yours ... and mine.

And all who agree said, "Amen."