

# Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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## The Epistle to the Romans: Sins - The Religious Jew (Romans 2:17-3:8)

Hello and welcome as we continue our series on the Epistle to the Romans. We now come to the section which considers the Religious Jew. In many Bibles, titles have been added to divide up chapters and this section, Romans 2:17-3:8, is often headed "The Jew", "The Religious Jew" or something similar. What we are about to consider can equally apply to people who today attend a "Christian place of worship" but who have never made a personal decision to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord. They, Jew and Gentile, are those who are often taken up with ceremonies, rituals, following a set of rules like the Mosaic law and the atmosphere of ancient religious buildings but are untouched in their soul. The vital life connected with salvation, found only in a relationship with Christ, has not been experienced. Therefore, as we consider these Scriptures and mention the "Jew" we should also take account of those in our own society who have been sidetracked into believing that keeping rituals and church attendance, will gain them an entrance into heaven - it will not!

When we use the term "Jew" we are considering those who resettled into Palestine, the land of Canaan, which was promised by God to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the fathers of the nation of Israel. This resettled people came back to Canaan from their captivity in the Babylonian and Medo-Persian empires. The Jews were the people of the southern kingdom when Israel as a nation split into two after the death of Solomon. They were mainly from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin but also included other members from the other tribes of Israel, such as Levi and Asher. After their return from captivity, the newly reformed nation eventually became very religious and two very strict religious groups developed, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. These two religious groups became the two dominant ecclesiastical schools of teaching. Both these groups either added to or took away from God's word and became more concerned with ritual rather than the reality of faith in the one true God. Paul, the writer of the Epistle to the Romans, would no doubt have in mind these two groups, but he did not exclude the ordinary Jewish people who simply followed the nation's teachers concerning religious practice. We should mention that although this attitude dominated the Jewish nation, there were a few who saw the need for reality and faith in God.

We will now consider Romans 2:17-3:8 under four headings:

1. The Claims associated with being a Jew (Romans 2:17-20);
2. The Challenge: Do you practice what you teach? (Romans 2:21-23);
3. The Contradiction of an inconsistent lifestyle (Romans 2:24-29);
4. The Consistent God (Romans 3:1-8).

### 1. The Claims associated with being a Jew (Romans 2:17-20)

Let us read Romans 2:17-20: *"Indeed, you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law."*

Paul, in these four verses, Romans 2:17-20, outlines what the Jew thinks about himself and his religion. Now Paul was well qualified to state this outline of Jewish thinking because of his birth, upbringing and that for many years he would claim that it was true of himself. Paul writes very similar words when communicating to the Christian assembly at Philippi. He states in his letter to them, Philippians 3:5-6, *"... circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless."*

The Jews' religion dominated their total life. The law was documented in the Pentateuch and was the foundation for religious, social, family and business life. It was 24/7 lifestyle. This law was given by God to Moses and communicated to the nation of Israel in the early months of their departure from Egypt. As a result, they boasted in the one true God as the only real and living God who was their God. Every born again Christian believes in the one true God in three Persons. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. So far, they were correct up to the point in time when Jesus was born into this world. By this time, they had descended into ritualism and had lost sight of God entirely. They still claimed to know God's will but had lost sight of what Moses in the law had taught. They were intended to be a

nation which represented God to all nations. The prophet Jonah demonstrated that not everyone wanted to preach a message of repentance to Israel's enemies. They claimed to approve things that are excellent as instructed out of the law and yet they had corrupted God's teaching. The Pharisees and Sadducees had promoted their own thinking, sometimes contrary to God's word, and their teaching became a burden to the ordinary people. They also excluded the Gentile nations as a lower class of people than themselves. Their Samaritan neighbours were a prime example of their attitude towards others.

The Jews also set themselves up as the teachers to bring God's word to other people to guide them into the right way of living but promoted their own faulty teaching. They made the Gentiles proselytes because they thought of themselves as guides to those who were blind to God's ways. The Lord Jesus corrected their thinking when he said of the Jewish teachers, especially the Pharisees, that *"they are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch"*, Matthew 15:14. The Lord indicates that the Pharisees were just as hopelessly lost as those they were trying to teach and convert. They claimed to be a light to those in darkness, but they were as much in the dark themselves! An instructor of the foolish was another claim but again the Lord said, in Matthew 7:26, *"But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand."* The Pharisees and Sadducees rejected what the Lord said so the Lord showed that they were building their lives on the unstable foundation of sand which is so easily washed away. They claimed to be teachers of babes and yet they did not know the Person of Jesus who said, *"Let the little children come unto Me"* (Matthew 19:14). Finally, they claimed to have *"the form of knowledge and truth in the law"* (Romans 2:20). The Lord Jesus could rebuke them and said in John 5:39, *"Search the scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of me."* Their understanding was faulty, they had not the truth and in many ways, it was not based upon the law given to Moses. Paul now follows this with a challenge.

## 2. The Challenge: Do you practice what you teach? (Romans 2:21-23)

Let us read Romans 2:21-23, *"You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, 'Do not commit adultery,' do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonour God through breaking the law?"*

Paul now gives the challenge in five questions. He is challenging the reality of what they say.

- Do you take notice of your own teaching?
- Do you never steal?
- What is your morality like?
- Are you an adulterer? And finally,
- Have you never ever broken the law?

It is fine being a teacher of God's word, but do we listen to our own words? Is the message going into our own hearts and affecting how we live? Paul would know firsthand about hypocrisy; he had been in the very system and said of himself, *"...concerning the law, a Pharisee"* (Philippians 3:5).

## 3. The Contradiction of an inconsistent lifestyle (Romans 2:24-29)

Let us read Romans 2:24-29, *"For 'the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,' as it is written. For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfils the law, judge you who, even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law? 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 of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God."*

Paul commences this section with a very serious challenge to the Jew, *"For 'the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you'"* (Romans 2:24). This is both a serious and sad challenge to the Jewish people. Their Gentile neighbours listened to what they said and observed their lifestyle and noticed the inconsistency between the two. We must ask this same question of ourselves: is what we say in our sermons supported by our 24/7 lifestyle?

For the Jew, circumcision was an important, God given, ceremony that went back to Abraham, the details of which are found in Genesis 17. Genesis 17:9-11 show the importance of circumcision, *"And God said to Abraham: 'As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you.'"*

Paul said that although circumcision was important and part of the Jewish identity, if they did not keep the principles of the law then circumcision was worthless. Paul then speaks of the uncircumcised Gentile who practises the God given principles of the law that he was morally better than the Jew. This was a great condemnation to this proud religious people, living their lives of hypocrisy. Paul concludes with this critical comment regarding their pretence, “[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 of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God” (Romans 2:29).

Paul in Romans 2:24-29 has now led the scriptural argument from what is outward, physical and following by rote the letter of the law to what is inward and spiritual. It is where God’s message of salvation touches the heart and soul and a real and new change is brought about by the forgiveness of sins and a true unalterable hope of being with Christ in heaven. It is this that highlights the true Christian believer that he has moved from a physical showy religion to that which is spiritual. It touches the heart and soul of a person and is not an outward sham.

#### 4. The Consistent God (Romans 3:1-8)

We now come to the final section of our talk as we consider Romans 3:1-8. Let us read these verses, *“What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God. For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar. As it is written: ‘That You may be justified in Your words and may overcome when You are judged.’ But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unjust who inflicts wrath? (I speak as a man.) Certainly not! For then how will God judge the world? For if the truth of God has increased through my lie to His glory, why am I also still judged as a sinner? And why not say, ‘Let us do evil that good may come?’ - as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say. Their condemnation is just.”*

Paul now seeks to show that God has always been consistent in His words and actions. In the Old Testament, Malachi 3:6 states, *“For I am the LORD, I do not change; therefore, you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.”* In the New Testament, speaking about the Son of God, Hebrews 13:8 tells us, *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”* God is consistent right through His inspired word which is the Bible.

In Romans 3:1-8 Paul is affirming the following:

- God is faithful;
- God is true;
- God is right in what He says;
- God’s judgments are fair; and
- God is righteous.

Paul opens these verses challenging the advantage that the Jew had and the value of circumcision. The first reason is God had committed the *“oracles of God”* to the Jew (Romans 3:2). The oracles would involve the communication of the Scriptures, especially that which related to the nation of Israel but also included the whole canon of the Old Testament. God taught about creation, the formation of a nation for Himself and the establishment of a form of worship that was based on a pattern in heaven and outlined to Moses, prophecy concerning the coming of the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ, including the future millennial kingdom. Finally, repeated warnings were given concerning the dangers of disobedience to the revealed word of God.

Disobedience was an oft repeated feature of the nation of Israel. Disobedience went “hand in hand” with idolatry and seeking assistance from Gentile nations instead of looking solely to God for help. The amazing thing is that, although there was this repeated failure of unbelief, God remained faithful, always working to bring this chosen people back to Himself! Paul considers in the above verses regarding the Jews’ unfaithfulness and whether this affected God’s disposition towards the nation.

He reacts strongly by saying, *“Certainly not!”* (Romans 3:6). The Jew, and Gentile for that matter, might make false statements regarding God and even call God a liar. However, God would always remain true to Himself and the promises made. This does not remove or lessen the impact of God’s judgment upon Jew and Gentile nations for their disobedience and open hostility to God. The next part of Romans 3:4 is not very clear as it states, *“As it is written: ‘That You may be justified in Your words and may overcome when You are judged.’”*

*“When You are judged”* has lost the meaning in some translations. The quotation is from Psalm 51 where King David is confessing his sin of adultery (see 2 Samuel 11:1-12:15) to God. Let us read a few verses from Psalm 51: *“A Psalm of David when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba. Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions.”*

*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight - that You may be found just when You speak, and blameless **when You judge***" (Psalm 51:1-4).

David acknowledges his guilt, seeks forgiveness by falling upon God's love and mercy and recognises that his adultery is an evil in God's sight. Therefore, God is always just or right when He speaks, and no blame can be attached to God when He judges because His judgment is always right and just.

Paul now states plainly that unrighteousness on our part will only highlight God's righteousness. God's judgments can never be considered as unrighteous because it is a just response to man's failure, disobedience and rebellion towards Himself. I always find it amazing that when a disaster or something similar occurs that God is often blamed but there never seems to be thankfulness expressed towards God when something good happens! We are quick to blame and negligent to be thankful. It is God's prerogative to judge, whether this is towards an individual, nation or to the whole world. There is a coming day of judgment and it is the Lord Jesus who will be the judge. John 5:22 states, "*For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son.*" This is very fitting since this world crucified Jesus, the only person who never did anything wrong!

Paul, in Romans 3:7-8 deals with false charges levelled against himself and his companions, that in some perverse way they were preaching that believers should do evil so that good may be the result and that God's glory abounds when His servants speak lies. The logic of such statements is baffling to say the least. Paul's conclusion regarding those who falsely accuse him, and his companions, is that the judgment of such people is just. Why? Because judgment comes from a just God.

Thank you for listening to *Truth for Today* on Romans 2:17-3:8, "The Religious Jew", talk number 1083. May the Lord bless and encourage you.

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