

# **Romans: The Good News of God**

## **Can the Sacraments Save You?**

*Romans 2:25-29*

**Rev. Freddy Fritz**

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# Can the Sacraments Save You?

## Scripture

Several times a year I receive a phone call from a person in our community with no connection to our church who asks the following question: “Pastor, will you baptize my baby?”

I briefly explain to the person what baptism is, and that it is a sacrament for church members and their children.

After the conversation is over I often wonder why the person wanted his or her baby baptized. Do you know why a person wants his or her baby baptized? Why would you baptize your child?

The number one reason, it seems to me, why people from the community want their children baptized is because they believe that somehow baptism will save their children. There is a widespread belief that baptism is necessary for salvation.

Baptism, of course, is the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament sacrament of circumcision. The Jews of Paul’s day believed that if they were circumcised, they would automatically be in a right relationship with God. Paul challenges this thinking in our text for today. Pay close attention as I read this text that at times sounds like a tongue-twister! Let me read Romans 2:25-29:

**<sup>25</sup> Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. <sup>26</sup> If those who are not circumcised keep the law’s requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? <sup>27</sup> The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.**

**<sup>28</sup> A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. <sup>29</sup> No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man’s praise is not from men, but from God. (Romans 2:25-29)**

## Introduction

To John Barrier, it wasn't the 60 cents. It was the principle.

During a lunch break Barrier walked into his bank to cash a \$100 check and then asked the receptionist to validate his parking ticket. The receptionist refused to do so. Even after mentioning that he was a "substantial depositor," Barrier's request was refused. The receptionist explained that validation was only given for transactions involving a deposit.

Barrier felt his appearance—dirty construction clothes—was the reason for his treatment. He thought the Bank Manager looked at him like he'd "crawled out from under a rock." Barrier contacted bank headquarters with his complaint. When no one returned his call, he started emptying his account—\$1 million at a time!

According to Barrier, "If you have \$100 in a bank or \$1 million, I think they owe you the courtesy of stamping your parking ticket."<sup>1</sup>

Here is a good example of how easy it is to judge people by their appearance—and be wrong. And while we are so prone to make improper judgments based on appearance, God *never* makes such a mistake, for as 1 Samuel 16:7b says, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

## Lesson

This is what the Apostle Paul is getting at in this last paragraph of Romans 2, as he deals for the final time with the objections of those who consider themselves to be so thoroughly religious that they do not need the gospel. The issue is the Jewish sacrament of circumcision and the accompanying claim made by the Jews that all who have been circumcised will be saved.

The point of today's sermon is that no-one is saved by the

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<sup>1</sup> Elisa Tinsley, "Bank gets \$2M Lesson," *USA Today* (2-21-89, p. 1A).

sacraments. I am indebted to Dr. James Montgomery Boice, author and one-time pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church, from whose commentary much of today's material is drawn.

## I. Last Retreat of the Orthodox

Commentator Robert Haldane writes that “Paul here pursues the Jew into his last retreat.”<sup>2</sup> The Jew, who was the chief example in Paul's day of the thoroughly religious person, had begun his defense against Paul's gospel by the argument that he (or she) possessed the law.

Paul argued in Romans 2:17-24 that possession of the law of God, although undoubtedly a great privilege, is of no value if the one possessing the commands of God fails to keep them. The Jew, along with everybody else, had broken those laws. So it was not sufficient to say, “I have the law, and therefore I do not need the gospel.” On the contrary, the law was given to reveal the Jew's—and our—need of God's grace.

Still, the Jew had one last card to play, one final argument—and that was *circumcision*. (Our New Testament counterpart is *baptism*). He had been circumcised, and circumcision had brought him into visible, outward fellowship with that community of covenant people to whom God had made salvation promises. It was like saying that circumcision had made him a member of that community, and because of that membership his salvation was certain.

The Jew really believed this—just as many people today believe that they are saved because of their baptism and membership in a church! In the various commentaries I possess, the most thorough documentation of this point is by Charles Hodge, who drew it from a variety of scholars. Hodge writes:

Rabbi Menachem in his *Commentary on the Books of Moses* (fol. 43, col. 1) says, “Our Rabbins have said that no circumcised man will see hell.” In the *Jalkut Rubeni* (num. 1) it is taught, “Cir-

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Haldane, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (MacDill AFB: MacDonald, 1958), p. 100.

cumcision 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 of *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.”<sup>3</sup>

The argument is that salvation is for Jews, and that what makes one a Jew is circumcision.

Today, even Jews are not quite certain about what it is that makes one a true Jew. The most common answer is that a Jew is a person who has descended from Abraham.

Yet what about Ishmael and those who descended from him, the Arabs? Ishmael was Abraham’s son, but Ishmael’s descendants are not Jews, though they are of Semitic stock. To account for this, the official Jewish definition is that a Jew is a person who has a Jewish mother. By this reasoning, Isaac alone would be Jewish and Ishmael would be excluded.

But what about a child born of a good Jewish mother (or even two good Jewish parents) who converts to Christianity? Is such a person Jewish? According to the official theory, a child of a Jewish mother who converts to Christianity would still be Jewish. Yet in many Jewish circles conversion to Christianity is considered grounds not only for denying that the person is Jewish but also for excluding such a person from his or her own biological family.

So, what is it that makes a person a Jew?

Paul’s answer to this important question is radical. But notice: Paul does not say (since he is dealing with salvation matters) that one does not have to be a Jew to be saved, but rather that one has to be a *true* Jew which, as he points out, is not a matter of external criteria—such as possession of the law, descent from Abraham, or circumcision—but of a new heart: **“A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward**

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans* (Edinburgh and Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), p. 63. (Original edition 1935) Hodge draws his material from Eisenmenger’s *Entdecktes Judenthum*, part 2, 285.

**and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code . . .”** (2:28-29).

## **II. What Is a Sacrament?**

Most of us are not personally affected by the contemporary debate over the definition of a true Jew.

But the matter of a new heart accomplished in us by the Holy Spirit (2:29) is our concern. And as far as the sacraments go (our sacraments are baptism and the Lord’s Supper, which have replaced circumcision and the Passover), the issue is the relationship between the sacraments and the reality of the new heart.

Let me define a sacrament from a Christian point of view. There are four elements that define a sacrament:

*First, a sacrament is a divine ordinance instituted by Christ himself.* The New Testament sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, which were commanded by Christ, replaced the Old Testament sacraments of circumcision and the Passover, which God himself imposed on his people.

Baptism was instituted by Christ, for example, when he said, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing* them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

And the Lord’s Supper was instituted by Christ at the Last Supper, when he said, “Do this in remembrance of me . . .” (Luke 22:19).

*Second, a sacrament uses material elements as visible signs of God’s blessing.* In baptism, the sign is water. In the Lord’s Supper, the signs are bread, which signifies the Lord’s body, and wine, which signifies his shed blood.

Now, the signs are not the same as the elements to which they are pointing. For example, if you are driving on I-275 and you see a sign that reads “Tampa—25 miles,” you realize that the sign is pointing to Tampa. The sign is not itself Tampa. Or, if see a sign

saying “Drink Coca-Cola,” you know that the sign itself is not Coca-Cola. It is only pointing you in that direction.

It is in this way that the sacraments point to spiritual realities. Baptism signifies our vital participation and union with Christ. The sign is secondary, outward, and visible. The reality is primary, inward, and invisible.

*Third, a sacrament is a means of grace.* This does not mean that spiritual life is automatically communicated to the one who participates in the sacraments in some magical way, so that he or she is automatically saved. This is the point Paul is denying in his discussion of circumcision in our text.

But this negative truth is not the same thing as saying that the sacraments have no value. Indeed, immediately after denying in Romans 2 that one is saved by circumcision, Paul goes on to speak of the “value” of circumcision in Romans 3, which we shall see next time.

But how are the sacraments a means of grace? When I say that the sacraments are a means of grace I do not mean that they convey *saving* grace, but rather that they *convey* helping or *strengthening* grace. Just as Bible reading and prayer helps and strengthens our relationship with God, so also the sacraments help and strengthen our relationship with God.

*And fourth, a sacrament is a seal, certification, or confirmation of the grace it signifies.* Earlier I pointed out that a sign points to something other than itself, like the sign pointing a traveler to Tampa or encouraging him to drink Coca-Cola.

But a sign frequently does something else as well: It indicates ownership. A sign saying “Joe’s Restaurant,” usually means that the restaurant belongs to Joe. A sign reading “United States Courthouse” means that the building on which it is found is the property of the federal government. Similarly, some signs authenticate documents. A seal on a passport or academic transcript validates that document.

Theologians refer to sacraments as “signs and seals” of some reality: signs because they point to them, seals because they au-

thenticate the one submitting to the sacrament.

This is what made baptism such an important sign for Martin Luther. There were times in the midst of the fearful events and debilitating pressures of the Reformation when Luther, who went up and down emotionally, as forceful leaders often do, became confused about everything. In his most bleak periods he questioned the value of the Reformation; he questioned his own faith; he even questioned the value of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ on his behalf.

But we are told that when that happened he would frequently write on the table in front of him in chalk the Latin words *baptizatus sum!* (“I have been baptized!”). That sign would point him to the spiritual reality, and he would be reassured that he really was Christ’s and had been identified with him in his death and resurrection.

Being a Jew was important. In fact, in a sense every saved person must be a member of that covenant people. But only if you are a *true* Jew (cf. Galatians 6:16)! That is, one must be a Jew inwardly and spiritually, not necessarily by physical descent from Abraham.

In the same way, circumcision is of value, but only if it points (like baptism and the Lord’s Supper) to the reality of a changed heart.

### **III. Summary of Romans 2**

We have now come to the end of Romans 2, and it is time to summarize Paul’s teaching in this chapter.

The Apostle has been dealing with persons who would agree with his condemnation of the heathen (as expressed in Romans 1), but who would excuse themselves on the grounds either (1) of being very moral, that is, people who know higher standards of conduct than those possessed by the heathen; or (2) of being thoroughly religious and therefore of being saved by the possession of the revealed law of God and by participation in the sacraments.



Do you know of any people like that today? Of course you do. You may even be one of them. Here is what the Apostle Paul says to such people.

*First, knowledge alone, even knowledge of the highest spiritual and moral principles, does not win God's approval.* On the contrary, superior knowledge actually leads to even greater condemnation—if it is not accompanied by adherence to the higher standard. Both the moral pagan and the orthodox Jew were found wanting, not because they did not have a moral code or divine revelation, but because, having that code or revelation, they nevertheless failed to live up to it. The pagan did “the same things” he condemned in others (2:1-3). The Jews likewise “broke the law” (2:21-23).

*Second, membership in a religious community, whether the covenant nation of Israel or the visible Church, does not guarantee that you have obtained God's favor.* It is not that belonging to the visible community of God's people is unimportant. It is. But salvation is not won by any external associations (as we have seen).

God looks not on outward appearances but on the heart.

Jews have been saved. They are being saved. But it is not because they are Jews!

Church members are likewise being saved. But it is not because you are church members!

If anyone could perfectly keep the law of God, you would be saved by keeping it. But no one can perfectly keep the law of God. All have broken the law of God.

Therefore, you can be saved *only* as the result of Christ's death on the cross and the application of that work to you by the Holy Spirit. This alone brings you into the true company of God's elect people and develops a life consistent with that new identity.

*Third, the sacraments, either of the Old Testament or the New Testament periods, save no one.* They point to what saves, but they are not the reality themselves. Charles Hodge observes, “According to the apostle, the true idea of a sacrament is not that it is a mystic rite, possessed of inherent efficacy or conveying grace as a

mere *opus operatum*; but that it is a seal and sign, designed to confirm our faith in the validity of the covenant to which it is attached; and from its significant character to present and illustrate some great spiritual truth.”<sup>4</sup>

*Fourth, God judges according to truth and performance, and by that standard every human being is condemned.* We may not like the concluding part of that sentence. But we can hardly disagree with the rightness and value of the first part.

Would it be right for God to judge in any other than the highest and most righteous fashion? Could he judge in any way other than by truth? Could he admit falsehood or deception before the bar of justice? Could he allow pretense or wishful thinking or mere intentions, rather than actual deeds, to slip by? Could he overlook sin, just because a person is a Jew? Or a church member? Or just because he or she might know better? Obviously, none of these perversions of justice can occur with God, though they are all too common in human systems. If this is true, then of themselves no human will be justified.

*And fifth, if you are to be saved, it must be by the work of Jesus Christ applied to you by the Father through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.* When David sinned and then confessed his sin in Psalm 51, even though he confessed his sin genuinely and thoroughly, he did not suppose that it was the mere fact of his confession that would save him. On the contrary, he looked entirely to God. He prayed: (1) “Cleanse me with hyssop . . .” (Psalm 51:7). Hyssop was used to sprinkle the blood of the animals used in the Jewish sacrificial system. So this was a plea for cleansing by the blood of the atonement. And he added: (2) “Create in me a pure heart” (Psalm 51:10). As the next verse makes clear, David understood this to be something that could only be accomplished by the Holy Spirit, which is precisely the point to which Paul comes at the conclusion of Romans 2.

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<sup>4</sup> Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans*, p. 67.

## Conclusion

I end with one last observation. In the final sentence of Romans 2, Paul has a pun, which is untranslatable in English but which takes us back to the identification of a true Jew, with which we began. The word **Jew** comes from the name of Judah, the fourth son of Jacob (or Israel, Genesis 32:28), and the pun is found in the fact that Judah means “praise.” When Leah gave birth to Judah she said, “This time I will praise the Lord,” and the text adds, “So she named him Judah [or ‘praise’]” (Genesis 29:35). Similarly, when Jacob was dying, he said, using the same pun, “Judah, your brothers will praise you” (Genesis 49:8a).

This is the pun Paul uses at the end of the chapter: “**Such a man’s praise is not from men, but from God**” (2:29). He means, “True Jewishness (Judah or praise) is from God and is spiritual. It does not come from men by outward things like circumcision.”

First Samuel 16:7b says, “Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” God looks beyond your profession and sees whether or not you have a new heart.

The problem with the Jew that Paul was addressing is that he was trusting in the sacrament itself to save him. And, of course, it cannot. The sacrament is intended to point to the reality of the new heart.

God looks at you and he looks at me. He looks beyond your profession, your baptism, your church membership, and he looks for a new heart. Do you have one? If not, cry out to God to create in you a new heart today. Amen.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons)
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## Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

*Answers for Life!*

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: [Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org](mailto:Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

Web site: [www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org](http://www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

**PRAAYER:**

Our Father in heaven, you have given us the sacraments as signs and seals of your promise to save us and to bring us into a relationship with you. However, too often we confuse the sign and the salvation that is signified by the sign. Sometimes we think that merely having the sign will save us, when in fact it is only your Spirit that gives us new life.

If there is anyone here today who is trusting in his or her baptism for salvation, will you help that person to see his or her peril. Enable us to trust in you alone for the gift of eternal life, and not to trust in our baptism.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.