

Romans 2:25-29

Is There Any Value in Circumcision?

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus exhorted those who listened to Him to examine their hearts

- Specifically, Jesus contrasted two different ways of living

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock. 25 And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock. 26 And everyone who hears these words of Mine, and does not act upon them, will be like a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. 27 And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and it fell, and great was its fall” (Mt 7:24-27)

In this passage, Jesus contrasts the two different foundations of an individual’s life

- A wise man builds his house on the rock
 - o The rock is a sure foundation that can withstand the storms of life
 - o The wise man’s house will not fall
- A foolish man builds his house on the sand
 - o The sand is an uncertain foundation that will not withstand the storms of life
 - o The foolish man’s house will fall

My father was in the construction business

- He was responsible for digging foundations for houses

If a house foundation was not secure, that home would suffer later

- Walls would be crooked
- Doors would not close properly
- Floors would be out of level

All of these symptoms were caused by a faulty foundation

What is true in the physical realm is also true in the spiritual realm

- Everything is contingent upon a solid foundation

If you have a steady foundation, like the wise man spoken of earlier, your house will stand

- But if your foundation is unsteady, like the foolish man mentioned earlier, your house will not stand

In Romans 2, Paul has been examining the foundation of the Jewish people

- As a Jew himself, the apostle Paul knew what the Jews trusted in and relied upon

One by one, Paul exposes the false foundations of the Jew

- The Jewish heritage/lineage
- The possession of the Old Testament Scriptures

The Jewish people had tremendous pride in these two foundations

- They looked upon themselves as the covenant people of God
 - o After all, they were the people to whom God gave the OT covenants

- They viewed themselves as spiritually superior because of their exposure to the OT Scriptures

Paul has already shown how the physical Jewish lineage and mere possession of God's Word did not safeguard the Jews from God's judgment

- As a matter of fact, their exposure to God made them all the more accountable and responsible

This morning, as we wrap up Romans 2, we will see a third false foundation that the Jews relied on

- That is the rite of circumcision

Let's read Romans 2:25-29

The Jews were proud of their commitment to circumcision

- They erroneously believed that it would somehow earn them salvation
- They falsely believed that going through the physical rite of circumcision would earn them favor with God

What would God have us to learn from this passage?

- I think He would have us to think about two essential truths about various symbols in the Christian faith
 - o Don't rely on the outward rite (2:25-27)
 - o Do rely on the inward reality (2:28-29)

I. Don't rely on the outward rite (2:25-27)

Much of this morning's message assumes a knowledge of circumcision

- It would benefit us to take some time and examine this rite from a Scriptural standpoint¹

At its most basic level, circumcision refers to the cutting away of the foreskin from the male reproductive organ

- It was most often performed at 8 days of age
- Doctors have discovered that the amount of prothrombin, an agent within the body that helps with coagulation of the blood, is most present at 8 days of age

The Jews were not the only ones to practice circumcision

- Nor were they the first to practice this rite
- There is evidence to show that as far back as 4000 B.C., individuals were practicing circumcision

The first mention of circumcision in the Bible is found in the book of Genesis – the book of beginnings

- **Let's turn there for a few moments**

In Genesis 15:4, Abram is promised a son by the LORD

- Not an heir from his house, "**but one who shall come forth from your own body**" (Ge 15:4)

In response to God's promise of innumerable descendants, the text tells us in Genesis 15:6, "**he (Abram) believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness**"

¹ Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House. Much of the following discussion comes from this excellent article on circumcision.

It is extremely important to understand the significance of that verse

- Abram believed the LORD based on faith, not by works
- God reckoned Abram's faith as righteousness

Abram wasn't circumcised at this time; therefore, circumcision played no part in his righteousness

- Abram didn't have the written or verbal Law of God at this time; therefore, the Law played no part in his righteousness
- As a matter of fact, the Law would not be given to Moses for several hundred years after Abram's belief

Later in Genesis 15, the LORD causes Abram to enter into a deep sleep

- Yet Abram is allowed to see the LORD initiating a covenant, all by Himself with Himself
- The fulfillment of this covenant was not contingent upon Abram's obedience

What happens in Genesis 16?

- Abram and Sarai grow impatient regarding the birth of children
- So they take matters into their own hands

Sarai hatches a plan whereby Abram marries Hagar, Sarai's maid

- Immediately, Hagar is pregnant with a son, Ishmael

But Ishmael isn't the son of promise

- He is the son of fleshly indulgence and impatience

13 years after the birth of Ishmael, the LORD reappears to Abram, reaffirming His promise of future children

- Genesis 17:4-5 utter these powerful words, "**As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I will make you the father of a multitude of nations**" (Ge 17:4-5)

Notice that Abraham would not be the father of the Jews only

- He would also be the father "**of a multitude of nations**"
- This is a clear reference to non-Jews – the Gentiles

The LORD speaks of a covenant with Abraham

- The covenant would involve Abraham and his descendants
- The covenant involved a land, seed (descendants), and a blessing

Then, in Genesis 17:10, the first instance of circumcision is recorded in the Bible, "**This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised**"

- Abraham was circumcised at 99 years of age (17:24)
- Ishmael was circumcised at 13 years of age (17:25)
- All the men of Abraham's household were circumcised (17:27)

Why was circumcision chosen as the sign of God's covenant with Abraham?

- Ultimately, the LORD has His reasons
- This was His choice

But here is what we know²

- Circumcision was an expression of faith that God's promises would be realized
- Circumcision was a permanent reminder of God's covenant promises

Circumcision was performed on the male reproductive organ

- The sign and rite of circumcision was intricately involved with the propagation of the human race

Earthly fathers passed along the sin nature to their children

- Circumcision was a permanent reminder of the sinfulness of humanity
- Circumcision was a constant reminder that humans needed Divine cleansing from sin

But over time, the Jews began to place more emphasis on the rite than the reality

- In other words, they paid more attention to the physical than the spiritual
- They lost sight of the spiritual cleansing that the circumcision pointed to

The Jews even began to place too high of an emphasis on circumcision

- They thought that circumcision safeguarded them from God's judgment
- It was a source of pride for the Jew

Just how distorted had the Jews become in their thinking as it related to circumcision?

- Jewish tradition pictured Abraham sitting at the gate of Gehenna to make sure that no circumcised person would go into perdition³

In the book of Acts, however, God clearly showed that the Gospel was sent to both Jews and Gentiles

- Jewish believers were taken back when they realized that uncircumcised Gentiles were receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 10:44-48)
- There was no difference between the believing Jews and believing Gentiles

This was, without a doubt, fulfillment of several OT prophecies

- Moses promised that God would circumcise the hearts of His people (cf. Deut 30:6)
- Ezekiel prophesied that the Lord would give a new heart to His people (cf. Ezek 36:25-27)

The Jews had to acknowledge that the inward reality symbolized by circumcision could be accomplished *without the physical sign*⁴

- The Gentiles were obviously not physically circumcised, yet they experienced the work of God in their hearts

That brings us back to our study in Romans

- As a Jew, Paul uses this background in discussing the issue of circumcision with the Jews
- He destroys the false security that they had placed in circumcision

[25 For indeed circumcision is of value, if you practice the Law;](#)

In no way does Paul insinuate that circumcision was useless or meaningless

- After all, the covenant that God initiated with Abraham was an everlasting covenant
- The sign of that covenant was circumcision

² Elwell & Beitzel.

³ Everett F. Harrison, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Romans*, 34.

⁴ Elwell & Beitzel.

Furthermore, in Romans 3:1, the apostle will argue that there is great advantage in being a Jew and being circumcised

But the value of circumcision was applicable only if the Jews practiced the Law

- The insinuation is that the Jew could benefit from circumcision if he was obedient to the Law

Paul refuses to attach any saving merit or value in the physical act of circumcision

- On the contrary, Paul stresses that God looks for obedience in the heart, not surgery in the foreskin⁵

but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.

The reality of the situation, however, was that the Jew was not completely obedient to the Law

- In a word, the Jew was as much a sinner as the Gentile

In that sense, the physical rite of circumcision didn't give an advantage to the Jew

- As a sinner, he was still subject to God's judgment and wrath

Moreover, Paul argues that sin actually caused the Jew's circumcision to become "uncircumcision"

- Paul does not hint that the Jew somehow annuls his physical circumcision

Paul shows that through his disobedience, the proud, circumcised Jew has become uncircumcised in heart⁶

- His heart is far from God
- His life is a contradiction of what it means to be part of the covenant family of God

The Jew thought that physical circumcision accomplished something positive in his life

- But by his sin, the Jew has invalidated that privilege

James wrote in his epistle, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one *point*, he has become guilty of all. ¹¹ For He who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not commit murder.' Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law" (Jas 2:10-11)

- Partial obedience is still disobedience
- Disobedience highlights the reality of sin in a person's life

It may be a bit difficult to understand how a Jew might portray circumcision

- But allow me to give you a different example that may be easier to understand

For those of us who are married, our wedding day was a time of great excitement

- It was a culmination of much preparation and thought

On your wedding day, you committed yourself to one particular individual

- You promised that you would be faithful, "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health"

⁵ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 140.

⁶ C.E.B. Cranfield, *ICC, Romans 1-8*, 172.

As a sign of your commitment to your spouse, a ring was put on your finger⁷

- Its symbolism was meaningful
 - o Gold or other metal – indicates the precious nature of marriage
 - o Circular – indicates the never-ending commitment that is required of both marriage partners

This ring would be on your body for the rest of your life, till death do you part

- It would serve as a reminder of your wedding day

But let me ask you, “*Would you still be married if you didn’t have a ring on your finger?*”

- Most definitely!
- Your marriage wouldn’t be dissolved if you lost your ring or chose not to wear the ring

Let’s think of another facet of your wedding ring

- The mere fact that you wear your ring doesn’t guarantee your faithfulness to the marriage covenant, does it?

A person could wear his/her ring, and yet be unfaithful to the marriage covenant

- The outward symbol doesn’t always equate to the inward reality

Suppose that an adulterer wore his wedding ring proudly

- Although he was unfaithful to the meaning of the covenant, he still wore his wedding ring

Does the wedding ring mean anything to this man?

- It certainly doesn’t convey the sense of commitment, love, and devotion that he promised and pledged on his wedding day!

Furthermore, you could very well argue that by this man’s unfaithfulness, his wedding ring actually served the opposite of its original intention

- It showed that his heart was not reflecting the inner commitment that the ring demanded

On one hand, a wedding ring is just a piece of metal

- On the other hand, a wedding ring has value in that it declares your commitment to your spouse

Circumcision was an outward, external rite

- In and of itself, it was never designed to be the reality of the covenant
- It was simply a sign of the covenant – much like the wedding ring portrays the covenant of marriage

For a Jew who took pride in his circumcision, he had better ensure that his life was following in obedience to the other parts of the Law

- He didn’t have the option of selective obedience

As a matter of fact, in Galatians 5:3, Paul says, "**I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law**"

- Circumcision carried with it the obligation to keep the rest of the Law⁸

⁷ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *God’s Wrath*, 133.

⁸ F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale NT Commentaries, Romans*, 89.

But the Jew who habitually breaks the Law of God has become, for all intents and purposes, an uncircumcised unbeliever⁹

- His physical circumcision has made no difference in his life

To become uncircumcised isn't to reverse the physical surgery¹⁰

- It is to be treated and regarded as like a Gentile
- It is to forfeit any claim to be the covenant family of God

Despite the immense spiritual privileges that the unbelieving Jews had, they were really no different from an unbelieving Gentile

- Disobedience brings about condemnation
- Obedience shows the fruit of a changed life

[26 If therefore the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?](#)

The apostle suggests a rhetorical question to the Jew

- The implied answer is “yes”

If a believing Gentile – here classified as “**the uncircumcised man**” – is obedient to the Law, will God require him to become physically circumcised?

- The implied answer is, “No!”

The book of Acts has already shown that the Holy Spirit was sent to Jews, Gentiles, and Samaritans

- This showed the spiritual equality of all believers

In Acts 15:1, some Jews were trying to make circumcision a necessity for Gentiles to be saved

- But the Jerusalem Conference resolved that matter
- Gentiles would not have to become physically circumcised in order to be saved

The true Jew, in Paul's mind, was not one who gloried in the external and outward appearance (i.e., circumcision, Jewish lineage, possession of the Law)¹¹

- The true Jew was one who had entered into a saving relationship with God through faith

Lack of circumcision would not condemn a Gentile

- Neither would circumcision save the Jew¹²

Much of the second half of Romans 2 has shown that God is not partial to one group of individuals

- He is entirely righteous and just in His evaluation
- He doesn't play favorites

The Jews thought that they were the covenant family of God on the basis of their physical lineage, their physical circumcision, and their physical possession of the Law of God

- But therein lies the problem
- Everything was merely physical; they didn't go beyond the physical to the spiritual realities

⁹ Robert H. Mounce, *NAC, Vol 27*, 101.

¹⁰ Douglas J. Moo, *NICNT, Romans*, 169.

¹¹ Alan F. Johnson, *Everyman's Bible Commentary, Romans*, 58.

¹² Alva J. McClain, *Romans: The Gospel of God's Grace*, 85.

[27 And will not he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law?](#)

The Jew had the distinct advantage of having access to the revelation of God in the Old Testament

- Therefore, he knew what God required

As such, he was more accountable and responsible for his actions

- In no way could the Jew plead ignorance

Moreover, the Jew could not think that he could sit in judgment of the unbelieving Gentile

- The unbelieving Jew was no better than the unbelieving Gentile

As a matter of fact, the conduct of the believing Gentile would actually surpass the conduct of the unbelieving Jew

- The Gentile didn't have the Law of God; the Jew did
- Therefore, the Gentile's conduct far surpassed that of the Jew

Jesus mentioned that the Jews would be condemned by the men of Ninevah and the Queen of Sheba (cf. Mt 12:41-42)

- The men of Ninevah had repented at the preaching of Jonah
- That couldn't be said for the unbelieving Jews of Jesus' day and the unbelieving Jews of which Paul is addressing

The faithful obedience of believing Gentiles “[will stand as a rebuke to the faithless disobedience of hypocritical Jews](#)”¹³

The Jew was not to rely on an outward, physical rite

- The act of circumcision was never intended to be a means to an end

Paul reminds the Jew that he had “[the letter of the Law](#)”

- This was the physical and external form of the Law
- It was captured in written form

Both “[the letter of the Law](#)” and “[circumcision](#)” were external, physical crutches that the Jews leaned on heavily

- But Paul removes these crutches and tells the Jews that they needed to display obedience in the inner man

Circumcision was designed to point a greater reality

- That being the need for spiritual cleansing at the heart level

But the Jews relied on the physical act of circumcision

- And they discounted the spiritual need of cleansing

[I would venture to say that none of us boasts about circumcision as a ground for spiritual security](#)

¹³ John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur NT Commentary, Romans 1-8*, 160.

More than likely, the following issues are ones that we struggle with

- Relying on the faith of others – thinking that Christianity is transferred through a mother, father, grandparent, or friend
- Relying on church membership – thinking that being a member of a church equates to being a part of the body of Christ
- Relying on a profession of faith – thinking that walking an aisle, or praying a prayer equates to salvation (instead of looking at faith and repentance)

What are you relying on for your spiritual security?

- What is your spiritual foundation?

Don't rely on an outward, physical rite

- But do rely on the inward reality

II. Do rely on the inward reality (2:28-29)

²⁸ For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh.

In these closing two verses of Romans 2, there are a series of contrasts that need to be noted¹⁴

- Outward vs. inward
- Flesh vs. heart
- Spirit vs. letter
- Man vs. God

Various individuals have misunderstood what Paul was trying to convey in verses 28-29

- They insinuate that the Church has somehow replaced Israel
- This is called covenant theology or replacement theology

In the view of covenant theology, believers in the New Covenant have replaced the physical descendants of Israel in the Old Covenant

- But Paul will say later in Romans 10 that God still has a purpose for the nation of Israel
- The Church is not Israel

Paul does insinuate that the essence of being a Jew is an inward, spiritual reality

- A Jew isn't a Jew simply because he was born to a certain family
- As a matter of fact, that might blind him to his true spiritual need

Authentic Jewish is inward and spiritual¹⁵

- Not outward and physical

When Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes came to John the Baptist, he told them, "**do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham**" (Mt 3:9)

¹⁴ McClain, 86.

¹⁵ Mounce, 102.

²⁹ 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;

Paul directly speaks of circumcision as being more than the physical act

- Now the apostle speaks of “circumcision...which is of the heart”

There are a number of OT passages that speak of heart circumcision

- Obviously, this isn't a physical, external work of man
- This is a spiritual, internal work of God

Consider the following verses

- "Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live" (Dt 30:6)
- "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD and remove the foreskins of your heart" (Je 4:4a)

Perhaps one of the more powerful passages that shows how the Jews were uncircumcised in heart is Jeremiah 9

- "'Behold, the days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'that I will punish all who are circumcised and yet uncircumcised— 26 Egypt, and Judah, and Edom, and the sons of Ammon, and Moab, and all those inhabiting the desert who clip the hair on their temples; for all the nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised of heart'" (Je 9:25-26)

The prophet Jeremiah is very blunt in stating that Judah is no different from the other pagan nations around them – Egypt, Edom, Ammon, and Moab

- All of these nations practiced circumcision; however, they were still spiritually uncircumcised
- Their physical circumcision was practically meaningless

The true work of God is not performed in the foreskin

- It is performed in the human heart

The true work of God can only be brought about through the power and ministry of the Holy Spirit

- Not human hands

The true work of God takes place when a person understands spiritual truth, turning to Jesus Christ and repenting from sin

- This doesn't take place when a baby is 8 days old

and his praise is not from men, but from God.

The Jews prided themselves on their physical lineage

- The term “Jew” was originally reserved for the descendants of Judah
- As we have seen in recent weeks, “Judah” means “praise”

In a play on words, the apostle Paul accuses the Jews of obtaining his praise from men and not from God

- The Jew thought that he was praised of God because of his physical lineage
- But Paul informs the Jew that his praise is not from God, but from men

Oftentimes, we can be fooled and deceived

- This is because we look at the externals
- We can't see the heart

Samuel obviously fell into this trap with selecting a king

- The prophet saw Eliab, strong and handsome
- Yet God saw things differently

This is why human applause can be so misleading

- We are seeing the tip of the iceberg
- We don't see what lies beneath the surface

Some who appear to have it all together receive praise from men

- But God is able to examine the heart of that individual

Whose praise are you longing for?

- Do you need the constant affirmation from other humans?

This can become a trap

- Your longing for recognition and affirmation could very well transform into the fear of man
- You will live your life in such a way as to get the attention and applause from men

Jesus Himself spoke of some who “**loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God**” (John 12:43)

- Does that describe you this morning?

Jesus also spoke about the inability to please two masters

- You can't live for God and men
- You must make a choice

What the Jew needed to realize is that circumcision, in and of itself, was just an outward, external symbol

- It did not equate to salvation
- It could not bring salvation

In its truest form, the act of circumcision was an initial act of faith in God's promises

- The physical act was an everlasting reminder of the need for spiritual cleansing

When Jesus Christ has a personal conversation with Nicodemus, did Jesus discuss circumcision?

- Not at all!

Instead, Jesus told Nicodemus, "**Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God**" (Jn 3:3)

- This Jewish leader could not rest in his Jewishness
- He could not rely on
 - o His Jewish ancestry
 - o His knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures
 - o His circumcision

In order to see the kingdom of God, Nicodemus needed to be born again

- As a sinner, Nicodemus needed to embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior

In no way was Jesus content with Nicodemus' externals

- Jesus demanded an inward change
- A circumcision of the heart

This morning, you are building your life on one of two foundations

- The rock of God's Word in all its truth and power
- The sand of popular opinion

If you are building upon the rock of God's Word, you will stand against the storms of life

- But if you are building upon the sand of opinion, then the storms of life will one day show just how unstable and unsecure your foundation is

Have you experienced the type of inner, spiritual transformation that has been discussed this morning?

- Are you content with a shallow, external event?
- Are you willing to bank eternity on something that is external?

I would urge you to examine your hearts this morning

- Have you been born again?
- Has God begun His spiritual, sovereign work in your life?

Is your life changing?

- Or are you the same person that you have always been?

Listen to the words of the apostle Paul from the book of Philippians

- These words are from a man who was a strict Jew in every sense of the word
- Listen to how he contrasts his previous life with his present life

"If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: ⁵circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. ⁷But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, ⁹and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, ¹⁰that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; ¹¹in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. ¹²Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect, but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. ¹³Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Php 3:4b-14)