

"THE LAW IS NOT ENOUGH"

**I. Introduction**

- A. Within every human heart there lies a thought that is seldom explicitly stated but is always there lurking.
  - 1. That thought is, 'I am better than other people.'
  - 2. Even as Christians, we have to contend with this thought every day of our lives.
  - 3. It is so easy for us to think, 'I am better than those liberals, those Muslims, those homosexuals, those Roman Catholics, those Arminians, those people who educate their children in a different way than I do', and the list could go on and on.
  - 4. This way of thinking is confronted in the verses that we have just read from the epistle to the Romans.
- B. In this passage, Paul continues his relentless assault on human pride.
  - 1. The Jews thought that they were superior to the Gentiles because they were in possession of the Mosaic law.
  - 2. But Paul shows his Jewish readers that knowing the law is not enough.
  - 3. He shows them that the law needs to be done, that the law exposes hypocrisy, and that lawbreakers cannot be saved by external rites.

**II. The Law Needs to Be Done (12-16)**

- A. Our text opens with the words, "For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law."

1. Paul is using the term “law” to refer to the law of Moses, the law that God gave to Israel at Sinai.
  2. The point being made here is that this law cannot do anything about our sin problem.
  3. Ignorance of the law of Moses does not exempt sinners from God’s judgment.
  4. Possession of the law of Moses only condemns those who sin under it.
  5. While the law shows us what righteousness looks like, it cannot empower us to live righteous lives.
  6. The law can only command and evaluate.
  7. The law is good, but it is weakened by the flesh.
  8. Paul says it is only the doers of the law who will be justified.
  9. This is the first use of the important term ‘justify’ in Romans.
  10. This is the word that Paul uses to describe God’s judicial declaration that a person is ‘just’ or righteous in his sight.
  11. If we rely upon our performance of the law as the basis of our justification, then we have to do all that the law requires.
  12. As Calvin puts it, “If righteousness be sought from the law, the law must be fulfilled; for the righteousness of the law consists in the perfection of works.”
- B. Gentiles did not have the law in the form that it was given to the Jews.
1. The Gentiles were without the law in the sense that they were not in possession of the law that was given through Moses.

2. Nevertheless, they had the work of the law written on their hearts.
  3. All people have a moral sense, a sense of right and wrong, even though this moral sense can be distorted in many ways.
  4. Paul is telling us that no one even lives up to their own standard of morality, let alone God's standard.
  5. All have sinned against the light they have been given.
- C. When Paul speaks in verses 14 and 15 about Gentiles doing what the law requires, he is not saying that Gentiles can be saved by their works without knowledge of the gospel.
1. He is simply acknowledging that all people obey some parts of the law to a certain extent.
  2. Even unbelievers frequently refrain from committing murder, committing adultery, and stealing.
  3. They know in their heart that these things are wrong.
  4. Their conscience measures how well their lives conform to what they know of God's moral standard.
  5. There is an internal debate going on inside them, with their conscience sometimes accusing them and at other times excusing them.
  6. We should note, however, that Paul's use of the term "even" highlights that there is far more to accuse than excuse.
  7. This debate of the conscience will find its ultimate resolution on the day when "God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus."
  8. Even though a conscience can become so distorted that it calls good "evil" and evil "good", God's truth will prevail.

9. Every act of evil will be answered for.
10. Justice will be upheld.

### III. The Law Exposes Hypocrisy (17-24)

- A. We turn now to the next paragraph in our text, where Paul shows how the law exposes hypocrisy.
  1. He begins by listing some of the privileges that the Jews enjoyed.
  2. These were the things that made them feel superior to others.
  3. They place their confidence in the fact that as Jews they are members of the chosen people.
  4. They rely on law as the way of salvation.
  5. They boast in God in the sense that they think there is something about them that causes God to favor them.
  6. They know what pleases God.
  7. They see themselves as a source of light to the immoral, the ignorant, and the immature.
  8. There is no disputing the fact that as Jews they had been given much.
  9. What they failed to realize, though, is that for the one who is given much, much will be required.
  10. Mere knowledge of what is right does not make us acceptable to God.
  11. Knowing God's will only increases our obligations.

- B. In verses 23 and 24, Paul shows his Jewish readers that they fail to practice what they preach.
1. He exposes their hypocrisy by asking a series of rhetorical questions.
  2. They preach against stealing, but they themselves steal.
  3. They condemn adultery, but they commit it too.
  4. In saying these things, Paul may have in mind Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount about how God's commandments extend to all the parts of our being -- our thoughts, our wills, our affections, our words, and our actions.
  5. When we understand the law in this comprehensive sense, we are forced to admit that we transgress it in many ways.
  6. Paul also says that though the Jews hate idolatry, they are guilty of robbing temples.
  7. This may be referring to the sin of stealing from God by withholding tithes, or it may be speaking of literal temple-robbing.
  8. Temple-robbing was a common crime in the ancient world because temples housed so many expensive things.
  9. A Jew who robbed a temple was not only stealing but was also breaking God's command about not coveting the silver or gold of pagan idols. (see Deut. 7:25)
- C. Paul concludes this section by citing a verse from the prophet Isaiah: "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."
1. In its original context, Isaiah was referring to the disgrace that Israel's exile brought upon God's name.
  2. Israel went into exile as a result of their sin.

3. But in the ancient world, it was assumed that when a nation is conquered its god is also conquered.
4. That is what the Gentiles thought about Israel's God.
5. Paul is citing this verse to point out how Jewish immorality caused the Gentiles to conclude that there was nothing special about the God of the Jews.
6. Sadly, we do not have to think very long to recall the many ways in which God's name is dishonored by the actions of Christians today.
7. The world is always quick to point out when we do not practice what we preach.
8. Whenever that happens, God's name is blasphemed because of us.

#### **IV. Lawbreakers Cannot Be Saved by External Rites (25-29)**

- A. This brings us to the third paragraph in our text, where Paul shows that lawbreakers cannot be saved by external rites.
  1. The specific rite that Paul deals with in these verses is circumcision, which was the sign of inclusion in the covenant community under the old covenant.
  2. The mark of circumcision was placed upon all Jewish males as the sign of the covenant.
  3. It was the sign of both the spiritual covenant that God made with Abraham and the national covenant that God made with Israel at Sinai.
  4. If a Jew had the faith of Abraham, his circumcision was a seal of God's promise to justify all who believe his word of promise.
  5. If a Jew fulfilled his part of the national covenant, his circumcision served as a seal of what God had promised in that covenant.

6. By the first century, the distinction between the sign of circumcision and the reality that it signified had essentially been done away with among the Jewish people.
  7. Rabbis actually taught that no circumcised person would go to hell.
  8. Most Jews assumed that circumcision itself was sufficient for a person's justification.
  9. But this assumption was contradicted by the way in which circumcision functioned within the national covenant.
  10. Under the Mosaic law, even those who had been circumcised could be cut off from the covenant people if they transgressed any of the fundamental laws of Moses.
  11. This is what Paul is getting at when he says that circumcision only has value if a person keeps the law.
  12. Under the law of Moses, circumcision afforded no protection for lawbreakers.
  13. As an external rite, it has no power to save.
- B. Paul explains that the thing that matters is the spiritual reality that circumcision signifies.
1. True circumcision is a matter of the heart.
  2. It is a work done by the Holy Spirit.
  3. A person can possess the physical sign of circumcision without possessing the spiritual reality that it signifies.
  4. One passage that gives us insight into what circumcision signified under the old covenant is Colossians 2, where Paul writes, "In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were

also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.” (Col. 2:11-12)

5. Notice the two ways in which Paul uses the term ‘circumcision’ in this passage.
  6. He refers to Jesus’ death on the cross as a circumcision and he also refers to our participation in the benefits of that death as a circumcision.
  7. This tells us that circumcision was a sign that pointed ahead to Christ’s saving work on our behalf, just as baptism now points back to that saving work.
  8. This leads theologian John Fesko to sum up the overall meaning of circumcision as follows: “Circumcision symbolized the cutting off of the Seed to come, the One who would suffer on behalf of God’s people. Moreover, it symbolized the cutting away of the foreskin of the heart — the Spirit’s effectual calling of the believer. The same is true of baptism, in that it points to the crucifixion of Christ and His baptism in the wrath of God, but also to the death, burial, and resurrection of the believer unto new life.” [*Word, Water, and Spirit*, 384]
- C. We should not despise the outward signs that God gives to confirm the blessings that are held forth in the gospel, but we always need to remember that the signs themselves are no guarantee of those blessings.
1. True circumcision is not merely an external rite but is the spiritual reality that the rite signifies.
  2. The same is true of baptism or of any other rite, ceremony, or practice.
  3. Your worship attendance, your church membership, your observance of the Sabbath, your Bible reading and prayer time, your witnessing, your acts of charity — while these things are important, none of them can save you.

4. You must not look to anything that you do as the basis of your acceptance with God.
5. This is what Paul means by setting a contrast between the letter and the Spirit.
6. There is a world of difference between the outwardness of the law and the inner working of the Holy Spirit in conversion.

## V. Conclusion

- A. In spite of what our hearts tell us every day, we are not better than others.
- B. You may not commit the exact same sins that other people commit, but you fail to live up to the same righteous standard.
- C. The law is not enough for the simple reason that you cannot keep the law in any way that would merit God's approval.
- D. There is only one way to be justified: you need to renounce all of your righteousness and lay hold of the righteousness that comes from God.
- E. As Edward Fisher puts it in his classic book *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, "if you desire to be justified before God, you must either bring to him a perfect obedience of your own, and wholly renounce Christ; or else you must bring the perfect righteousness of Christ, and wholly renounce your own... Christ Jesus will either be a whole Saviour, or no Saviour; he will either save you alone, or not save you at all." [Fisher, 111, 112]