

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
July 3, 2-16

Lesson Text: Romans 2:17-29

Lesson Title: Ignoring the Law's Requirements

Introduction

In Romans 1:18, the Apostle Paul begins his argument as to why everyone needs the gospel. He addresses the Gentiles in Romans 1, who condemned themselves by pursuing false gods. When Paul condemned the world, the Jews claimed to be exempt from condemnation because they were Abraham's descendants and they were circumcised. To disprove their thinking, Paul addresses his own people, the Jews, in Romans 2.

The Jews pursued the one true God on their own terms which is no better than Gentiles making their own gods. In Romans 2, Paul addresses the problem of sin, the Law, and Jews who boast in God. The Jews often claimed a certain spiritual purity and superiority but continued sinning. They believed doing something externally, like trying to keep the Law, justified them in the sight of God. Being a Jew and attempting to keep the Law certainly had advantages, but the Jew, like every sinner, needed a change of heart that only comes by the new birth (John 3:1-7; Romans 3:1).

As we read Paul's indictment of the Jews, we need to keep in mind Paul was a Jew himself. Paul knew what it was to have an external appearance of religious superiority and still be without saving grace (Philippians 3:3-11). As a result of his conversion in Acts 9, Paul desired to see his Jewish brethren saved and that must begin by recognizing their lost condition (Romans 10:1).

Religious Arrogance (Romans 2:17-20)

Verse 17-18

"Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy boast of God, And knowest his will, and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law;"

The Jews "rested in the Law" because it was described as "*...your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations*" (Deuteronomy 4:6). "Restest" means "settled or to rely." Jews trusted the Law to be all they needed and the best education they could get. Thus, they made their "boast of God" who gave them the Law. To "boast of God" meant they claimed superior standing because they had the Law and knew the Law. As a result, they felt as if they "knew God's will" and they were "confident" they could "approve the things that

are more excellent.” “Approvest” means “discern things that are essential for life.” This meant they believed they were in a position to understand God’s will, recognize moral standards, and choose things that were right.

Paul’s purpose is not to belittle his fellow Jews or suggest their privilege as God’s chosen people is bad, but to help them understand their privilege and position does not save them. Living morally on the outside will do nothing to change the inside.

Verse 19-20

“And art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness, An instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, which hast the form of knowledge and of the truth in the law.”

The Jews felt they had a level of spiritual discernment others did not have. In fact, the Jews were “confident” of four things: First, they were a “guide of the blind.” The “blind” is a reference to Gentiles or everyone who is not a Jew. Second, they were “a light of them which are in darkness.” Jews believed Gentiles had no scriptural or spiritual enlightenment. Third, they were “instructors of the foolish.” Because Gentiles did not know the Law like the Jews, they considered them to be “foolish.” “Foolish” means “without reason, stupid.” Fourth, they were “teachers of babes.” Gentiles were obviously spiritually immature, objects of Jewish disgust.

The confidence of the Jew is based on the fact that in the Law he possesses “the form of knowledge and of the truth.” The Jews were proud of who they were and viewed themselves as leaders and guides of the poor foolish Gentiles. It only seems logical that people who thought of themselves as superior in spiritual matters such as the Law, knowing God’s will, and possessing the best things God has, would feel some responsibility and desire to share what they had with people “in darkness.”

Religious Self-Righteousness (Romans 2:21-24)

In Romans 2:21-23, Paul asks a series of five questions designed for the Jew to consider. His purpose is to expose the hypocrisy of Jewish self-righteousness.

Verse 21

“Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? thou that preachest a man should not steal, dost thou steal?”

Paul’s first question, “Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself,” was directed toward a person who taught another about right and wrong but who refused to teach himself.

Paul's second question, "Thou that preachest a man should not steal, dost thou steal," was directed toward a person who preached that another should not steal but who was guilty of stealing himself, something prohibited by the eighth commandment (Exodus 20:15).

Paul is leveling a general charge that his people, the Jews, do not practice what they "teach" or "preach." Teachers and preachers are accountable for living out what they teach and preach (James 3:1). Speaking of the scribes and Pharisees of His day, Jesus said, "...for they say, and do not" (Matthew 23:3).

Verse 22

"Thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery? thou that abhorrest idols, dost thou commit sacrilege?"

The third question, "Thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery" was directed toward a person who said a man should not commit sexual sins in general but who committed adultery himself, something prohibited by the seventh commandment (Exodus 20:14). Many Jewish men tried getting around the Law of God by divorcing their wives and marrying other women. But, Jesus declared divorce and remarriage on any ground other than sexual infidelity results in adultery (Matthew 5:32; 19:9). In fact, adultery can be committed by just looking (Matthew 5:28).

The fourth question, "thou that abhorrest idols, dost thou commit sacrilege," was directed toward a person who said they abhorred idols, and yet they commit sacrilege." "Abhorrest" means "to emit a foul odor." To commit "sacrilege" means "to rob temples." Some Jews said they "abhorred" idols like a stinking odor, yet Paul said they "robbed temples." To commit "sacrilege" or "rob temples" most likely refers to Jews plundering pagan temples solely for the purpose of selling idols for monetary gain. That was prohibited under the Mosaic Law (Deuteronomy 7:25).

Verse 23

"Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God?"

The fifth and final question, "Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God," was directed toward those Jews who boasted about their possession of the law of God but at the same time dishonored God by breaking that law. The word "dishonourest" means "to disgrace" or "bring low." By "breaking" or "stepping over the boundaries" of God's Law, they actually disgraced it.

Verse 24

“For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you, as it is written.”

The result of their hypocrisy was “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles.” Because of their hypocritical living, the Gentiles “blasphemed,” or “spoke lightly” of the God of Israel. Much the same thing could be said today about us who hear the word but fail to obey it!

In a sermon on Romans 2:17-29, Chuck Swindoll said, *“If by chance the individual could answer no to the first four questions or dare deny the fifth, he or she cannot escape the indictment of the prophets Isaiah or Ezekiel (Isaiah 52:5; Ezekiel 36:20-22). That is where ‘it is written.’ The Jew cannot, any more than the Gentile, claim exemption from God’s judgment on the basis of personal holiness or religious heritage.”*

Religious Heritage (Romans 2:25-29)

Verse 25-27

“For circumcision verily profiteth, if thou keep the law: but if thou be a breaker of the law, thy circumcision is made uncircumcision. Therefore if the uncircumcision keep the righteousness of the law, shall not his uncircumcision be counted for circumcision? And shall not uncircumcision which is by nature, if it fulfil the law, judge thee, who by the letter and circumcision dost transgress the law?”

If, somehow, Paul’s Jewish readers remain unconvinced of what he is saying, he addresses the most personal and intimate aspect of the Jew’s religious heritage. The rite of circumcision was given to the Jew by God for a high purpose in God’s covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17). It was meant to be a sign of their faith in God and thus an incentive for faithfulness to God. That is what made “circumcision verily profiteth.” However, if those circumcised Jews became “breakers of the law” the outward sign meant nothing. In fact, Paul said, “And shall not uncircumcision which is by nature, if it fulfil the law, judge thee, who by letter and circumcision dost transgress the law.” What he meant was, if an uncircumcised Gentile gives his heart to Christ and lives righteous, he is more pleasing to God than the circumcised Jew who does not! In other words, a good pagan will have a better standing with God than a bad Jew.

Verse 28-29

“For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and

circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.”

Surely being descendants of Abraham and being circumcised has to count for something. Or does it? Even birth in a Jewish family does not make one Jewish in the sense of being right with God. Paul’s message is a true Jew is not made one by *physical* circumcision. It must be *spiritual* circumcision “of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.” Paul concludes that mere physical birth alone cannot make a Jew righteous.

The “outward” signs do not make a Jew a true Jew. He must be one “inwardly.” “Circumcision of the flesh” is just ritual and religion. “Circumcision of the heart” is real righteousness.

A true Jew who is truly righteous before God is righteous because of “the spirit,” and “not in the letter.” This is a contrast between mere compliance with the ceremonial law and spiritual adherence to the moral law. The outward compliance in the works of the flesh gave the Jew “praise of men.” The inward work of God’s righteousness resulted in “praise of God.”

Conclusion

Paul’s message to the Jews is very different than a modern preacher’s message is today. If a modern preacher went to critique the Jews of Paul’s day, he probably would sound something like this: “I am okay, you are okay, we are all okay!” The difference in Paul and many preachers today is Paul loved and cared about depraved sinners, Jews and Gentiles alike. He cared enough to tell them the truth about their lost condition before a holy God. The requirements of God’s law could not be ignored.

Paul wanted the Jews to understand it was possible to be born of Abraham, but not born again by the Spirit of God. The only true Jew is one who is a Jew by race and a believer by grace. What about you?

Amen.