

FALSE HOPE AND EMPTY RITUAL ROMANS 2:25–29

INTRODUCTION

In his **enthusiasm for the gospel and the salvation of his fellow Jews**, Paul knew that he needed to **convincingly demonstrate their need for the gospel**.

Having come from a self-righteous rejection of the gospel himself, **Paul understood the Jewish mindset** that they did not need the righteousness of God through faith because, as they believed, **they were already right with God**.

The Jews believed that **they were the people of God** because of their **ethnic identity, relative morality, and religious activity**.

Thus, the Jews **misjudged their spiritual identity**, believing that they were God's special people because of their **ethnic heritage as descendants of Abraham** and that God would therefore judge them with favouritism or partiality.

At the **core of this misjudged spiritual identity**, the Jews misplaced their confidence in **two distinguishing marks of their Jewishness**.

The Jews believed that, as the people of God, they were right with Him because they, **firstly, possessed the Law of Moses** and, **secondly, practiced the ritual of circumcision**.

However, in order to **convince the Jews of their need for the gospel** and the righteousness of God through faith, Paul demonstrated that the Jews had **misplaced their confidence in the Law**.

Simply possessing the Law of Moses did not make them right with God.

As he continues his argument, **he will demonstrate next** that the Jews had also **misplaced their confidence in circumcision**.

The Jews viewed the Law and circumcision as **the two most important distinguishing marks** of their Jewish identity as God's special people.¹

As Paul will argue, however, being part of the people of God has got **nothing to do with the external matters** of **ethnic heritage, possessing the Law, or practicing circumcision**.

Rather, the people of God are those marked by the **inner spiritual reality** of a **new heart with the Law of Christ** written upon it, so that their faith in God is demonstrated by **works of obedience**.

Paul has already **introduced** this concept of **faith that produces obedience** as the mark of the true people of God.

In **Romans 1:5**, Paul used the important phrase, “**the obedience of faith**” as the mark of those who belong to God through Christ.

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *Romans*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 95.

Contrary to this, Paul is going to argue for us today that the **Jews misplace confidence in circumcision** because **without the inner spiritual reality** of a new heart producing the obedience of faith, practicing circumcision is **nothing more than false hope and empty ritual**.

As much as what **Paul targeted the unbelieving Jews** through his diatribe with a hypothetical debate opponent, **he wrote this instruction to the church in Rome**.

That means that Paul had a **broader purpose** than simply correcting Jewish self-righteousness that led to their rejection of the gospel.

More broadly, Paul wanted the church to understand that **our spiritual identity** as the people of God through Christ is demonstrated by **a new heart producing the obedience of faith**.

To say that differently, **a genuine Christian is marked by the inner spiritual reality of a new heart** with the Law of Christ written upon it, which produces the obedience of faith.

Just like the Jews who were moral and religious, yet excluded from the people of God because their unbelieving hearts produced disobedience, so there are many professing believers in the church who **think that they are Christians** despite not having a new heart and the fruit of obedience.

Just like the Jews, many in the church have **misplaced their confidence in practices** that Paul would consider **false hopes and empty rituals**.

Therefore, **Paul's instruction to the church in Rome** about the **Jewish need for the gospel** is essential for us to hear today.

Before we consider what Paul wrote, though, let's consider the **misplaced confidence of the Jews** in their **religious activities and rituals**.

Turn to **Matthew 3** as we see John the Baptist confront the false hopes of the Jewish leaders—

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

8 Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance;

9 and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham.

10 And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Both the Pharisees and the Sadducees were renowned for their **devotion to their religious practices**, but despite their strict adherence to **rituals like circumcision and the Sabbath**, John dismisses these as **nothing more than empty, external rituals**.

Instead, he calls for the **true fruit of repentance**—he calls for a **new heart producing the obedience of faith**.

According to John, neither the **Jews' ethnic identity as Abraham's children**, nor the **externals of their relative morality and religious activity** were sufficient to identify them as the people of God.

In fact, the Pharisees and Sadducees were incredibly offended by John's baptism because they **correctly understood** it to be **a call to publicly acknowledge that they were not the people of God**, but would only become the people of God through repentance and faith.

Similarly, there are many people today who **misjudge their spiritual identity**, believing that they are Christians because of their **relative morality and religious activity**.

They go to church and read their Bibles, but their lives lack the fruit of repentance.

There is no evidence of a new heart producing the obedience of faith, and they have misplaced their confidence in the **same kind of empty rituals** that the Jews did.

So whether Jew or Gentile, we all need to hear Paul's **warning against false hopes and religious rituals** which are worthless in God's eyes.

PROPOSITION

So today, as we study **Romans 2:25–29**, we'll see Paul **correct two misunderstandings** of the Jews in order to expose their practice of circumcision as no more than **false hope and empty ritual**.

1. **The misunderstanding of obedience (25–27)**
2. **The misunderstanding of circumcision (28–29)**

1. THE MISUNDERSTANDING OF OBEDIENCE (25–27)

If you remember, **verse 17** opens by addressing those who have the **spiritual advantage** of being called “**Jews**.”

Paul then addressed their **possession of the Law** as the most important **distinguishing mark of their Jewishness**.

The problem was not with the Law, but with the hypocrisy of the Jews who **did not practice the Law that they preached** to the Gentiles.

Therefore, their disobedience to the Law **nullified their advantage** in possessing the Law.

Similarly, as Paul shifts his focus now in **verse 25** to circumcision, he argues that **the disobedience of the Jews nullified their advantage** in practicing circumcision.

This would have been a **difficult pill for the Jews to swallow** because next to the Law, circumcision was the **most important distinguishing mark** of their Jewishness.

In fact, the Jews **placed so much confidence in the practice of circumcision** that Paul saying they had no advantage in it was almost like him saying they had **no advantage in God's covenants with Abraham and Moses**.

You see, circumcision of the **males in Abraham's family** was a **sign of God's covenant**, as we read in **Genesis 17:9-14**—

⁹ God said further to Abraham, “Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your seed after you throughout their generations.

¹⁰ This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your seed after you: every male among you shall be circumcised.

¹¹ And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.

¹² And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, one who is born in the house or one who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your seed.

¹³ A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.

¹⁴ But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.”

You can certainly understand why the Jews **considered circumcision to be so significant**.

Furthermore, the **circumcision of every Jewish male** was **commanded under the Law of Moses**, as we read in **Leviticus 12:3**—

Now on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.

So for the Jews, circumcision was **both a sign of the covenant** with Abraham **and a matter of obedience** to the Law of Moses.

How could Paul argue, then, that circumcision was a **false hope and empty ritual for the Jews**?

The first reason is that the Jews **misunderstood obedience to be focussed on religious rituals**, not understanding that **obedience is produced by a new heart**.

Therefore, the Jews **hypocritically obeyed the command of circumcision** while transgressing the remainder of the Law, because they **focussed on external ritual, not the internal heart change** that would produce consistent and characteristic obedience.

Look at **verse 25** where you see Paul make this argument with a **contrasting positive and negative** pair of statements—

For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law, but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.

As Paul argues, the external ritual of physical circumcision **can be valuable** if it is an act of obedience and demonstration of one's covenant relationship with God.

Circumcision can indeed be a **valuable fruit of faith**, that is, it can be an important act of obedience that **demonstrates the Law written on one's heart**.

In other words, **for a believing Jew**, the ritual of circumcision was a **demonstration of the obedience of faith**.

So then, as Paul puts it, the external ritual must be **accompanied by obedience** that may not be perfect, but is nevertheless **consistent and characteristic** of the believer.

In the Law itself, this necessity was **expressed by Moses' exhortation** to circumcise not only the body physically but the heart spiritually.

We read in **Deuteronomy 10:16**—
So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer.

This command is echoed in **Jeremiah 4:4** as God says—
“Circumcise yourselves to Yahweh and remove the foreskins of your heart, men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, lest My wrath go forth like fire and burn with none to quench it because of the evil of your deeds.”

So then, the **literal act of circumcision** must accompany the **metaphorical act of circumcision** which represents a changed heart.

A circumcised heart is obedient and an uncircumcised heart is disobedient, and when a Jew considered his own circumcision, the **external ritual was intended to remind him** of the necessity of the internal reality.

To put it simply, they **focused exclusively on the sign** of circumcision, and **overlooked the substance**.

Therefore, Paul argued that **instead of consistent obedience produced by a new heart**, they **consistently and characteristically disobeyed God**.

Paul tells the Jews that their **unbelief and uncircumcised hearts** were evident by being **“transgressors of the Law.”**

Their disobedience **nullified the advantage** of the religious activity and made it **nothing more than an empty ritual**.

In fact, **as you see** in **verse 25**, Paul goes further and argues that it is a **false hope** because they **misjudged their spiritual identity**.

They believed that **circumcision made them part of the covenant people of God**, but Paul argues that it is **actually obedience produced by a new heart** that identifies one as belonging to God.

To put it simply, Paul tells them that their **disobedience proves that they are unbelievers**.

That’s what he means when he says, **“your circumcision has become uncircumcision.”**

Obviously, he DOESN'T mean that the **foreskin literally regenerated**, but that the **significance as a sign** of belonging to God's covenant people is lost.

A Jew who continually transgressed God's Law proved that he had **no more saving relationship with God than a pagan Gentile**, whom Jews often referred to as the uncircumcised.²

The point is that **obedience is what demonstrates one's spiritual identity** as one of God's people, not the external ritual for circumcision.

Since the Jews were **relying on the ritual without the accompanying obedience of faith**, they were not considered by God to be part of His people—they were outside the covenant as **metaphorically “uncircumcised” unbelievers**.

So what Paul is arguing in **verse 25** is that for an **unbelieving Jew** who does not have a covenant relationship with God through faith, **circumcision is a false hope and an empty ritual**.

This is evident in the teaching of the **Jewish rabbis** who taught sayings such as “*No circumcised Jewish man will see hell*” and “*Circumcision saves us from hell*.”

² John F. MacArthur Jr., *Romans*, vol. 1, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 160.

The Midrash, containing Jewish interpretations of Scripture, includes the statement “*God swore to Abraham that no one who was circumcised would be sent to hell. Abraham sits before the gate of hell and never allows any circumcised Israelite to enter.*”³

The Jews **completely misunderstood** the need for obedience and **focussed on religious rituals**, without the obedience of faith as the product of a new heart.

By contrast, as Paul continues in **verse 26**, the **believing Gentile** who was **physically uncircumcised and yet produced** the obedience of faith from a new heart would be considered **metaphorically circumcised**.

In other words, their obedience would **prove their spiritual identity** as part of the covenant people of God, as Paul writes: **So if the uncircumcised man observes the righteous requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision?**

Once again, the obedience that Paul refers to here is **NOT perfect obedience**.⁴

He is NOT referring to those who **attempt to earn their own right standing** with God through their strenuous observance of the Law of Moses.

³ MacArthur, *Romans*, 160.

⁴ “The Spirit’s work on the heart logically precedes the observance of the law by the gentiles. Autonomous works are rejected, but works that are the fruit of the Spirit’s work are necessary to be saved. Paul isn’t speaking of perfect obedience, but of obedience demonstrating that one has been transformed.” Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Joshua W. Jipp, Second Edition, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2018), 153.

As we read the warning in **James 2:10**—

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.

Rather, Paul is referring to those who **consistently and characteristically obey God's commands** so that, as he referred to them in **verse 13**, they can be called "**doers of the Law**," that is, the Law of Christ.

The Gentiles who produced the obedience of faith from a new heart **proved to truly belong to the covenant people of God**, in contrast to the unbelieving Jews.

So Paul's point is that the **substance of belonging to God is obedience to His will**, and circumcision is simply a symbolic reminder, which is exactly what the Jews misunderstood.

Sincerely keeping "**the righteous requirement of the Law**" because it is God's will **is of great value**, whereas circumcision without obedience is of absolutely no value.⁵

For the **uncircumcised Gentile who believes in Christ**, the greatest value is in being "**counted as circumcision**," as Paul puts it.

Here again we see Paul **change from the literal act of circumcision to the figurative**, in order to argue that the Gentile who produces the obedience of faith is considered by God to be part of His covenant people.

⁵ MacArthur, *Romans*, 160.

He did something similar in **Philippians 3:3** when he described Gentile Christians as he wrote—

We are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.

Paul drives home his point that Jews misunderstood obedience with **verse 27**—

And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he fulfils the Law, will he not judge you who, through the letter of the Law and circumcision, are a transgressor of the Law?

Here again, Paul **contrasts** the misunderstanding of an **unbelieving Jew** with the understanding of a **believing Gentile**.

Whereas the Jew did not obey the Law, the Gentile does as the fruit of his faith.

It is helpful to note that by describing the Gentile as “**physically uncircumcised**,” Paul is indicating that **some of his other references** to circumcision and uncircumcision **should be taken figuratively**.

If every time Paul referred to circumcision and uncircumcision in the **literal sense**, then it would be **unnecessary to clarify** here in **verse 27** that he is referring to literal circumcision.

Now as you look at the verse, you can see that Paul’s question **parallels those of the previous verses**.

The unbelieving Jew is described once again as a “**transgressor of the Law**,” referring to the **disobedience that proves** a heart that is **dead in sin and unbelief**.

However, Paul uses a **slightly different description** for the believing Gentile when he refers to him as one who “**fulfils the Law**.”

Our task of interpreting this phrase is made a lot easier when we **remember that it parallels Paul’s earlier description** of this Gentile as a man who “**observes the righteous requirements of the Law**.”⁶

So once again, Paul is **NOT referring to perfect obedience**, but to the one who is a **consistent and characteristic “doer of the Law**.”

The closest parallel statement outside of this context that Paul makes about fulfilling the Law confirms this interpretation.

In **Galatians 5:14** he writes—
For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in this: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

When a Christian genuinely loves others, he fulfils all the moral requirements of the the Law.

This doesn't mean that his **obedience is sinlessly perfect**, but that there is **evidence of a new heart** producing the obedience of faith—especially the obedience of loving others.

⁶ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 174.

As you look again at **Romans 2:27**, Paul does **advance his argument** and **hammer home his point** by saying that believing Gentiles will “**judge**” unbelieving Jews.

In this context of **Romans 2**, the judgement here is clearly linked to the **final, eschatological judgment**.

However, that also clarifies for us that that the **Gentile will not assume the role of judge**, but rather that he will be a **witness for the prosecution**.

The believing Gentile’s obedience will be **evidence of what the Jew ought to have been** and could have been.⁷

The main reason that Paul refers here to the **theme of judgment** is to emphasise that Jews will not be saved merely by possessing the “**letter of the Law and circumcision**.”⁸

The Jews **misplaced their confidence** in these two marks of Jewishness—their **possession of the Law** and their **practice of circumcision**.

Despite these **natural advantages** of their Jewish heritage, they prove to **misunderstand the necessity of obedience** from a new heart.

By contrast, a **Gentile’s humble obedience** to the Law should serve as a stern **rebuke to the unbelieving Jew** who, despite these advantages, lives in characteristic disobedience.

⁷ Cranfield, *Romans*, ICC, 174.

⁸ Schreiner, *Romans*, 148.

So then, **as we look back over verses 25–27**, we can see that Paul has corrected the **first misunderstanding** of the Jews in order to **expose their practice of circumcision as no more than false hope and empty ritual**.

The Jews **misunderstood obedience**, not understanding that **obedience from a new heart** is what demonstrates your identity as a member of God's people.

Without such obedience, **circumcision is simply a false hope and an empty ritual**.

As we consider the **contemporary importance** of this, we can certainly make application to the **various religious rituals that we practice**.

To be clear, **there is nothing wrong with religious rituals** if they demonstrate the fruit of faith in God.

For example, a Christian's faithful observance of the **two ordinances of baptism and communion** is of great value if they are practiced as the **obedience of faith that demonstrates as new heart**.

However, there are many who **misplace their confidence** in the practice of these rituals as **mere acts of external religion**.

Much like the unbelieving Jews that Paul is confronting, many people wrongly believe that they are part of the people of God simply **because they own a Bible and regularly take communion, or the Lord's Supper**.

The greatest examples we have of this are the **Roman Catholics** who believe that they are right with God because **they regularly take mass**, which is their **heretical distortion** of The Lord's Supper.

The Roman Catholics believe that the **mass offers a real sacrifice for sin**, so that those who participate in it are saved by the ritual.⁹

However, while this is an **particularly grievous example** of the false hope and empty ritual that Paul is correcting, we **should not overlook the subtle ways** in which we as Protestants can be guilty of the same.

Celebrating communion is what offers many Bible-owning, church-going people a **false assurance of salvation** because they practice it as empty, external ritual.

When you celebrate communion it should be a demonstration of your obedience of faith from a new heart.

You should partake of the Lord's Supper because you are **assured that you are right with God** and a member of the people of God, **not so that you can find assurance of salvation** in the performance of a religious ritual.

The same must be said about the **second ordinance** of baptism.

⁹ James R. White, *The Roman Catholic Controversy* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), 164.

William Webster, *Salvation, The Bible, and Roman Catholicism* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), 22–23.

It should be an act of obedience from a new heart, not an empty, external ritual that you misplace your confidence in.

This is perhaps an even greater danger to us because of the **influence of the Reformed, covenantal practice of infant baptism.**

Those who practice **infant baptism, or paedobaptism,** believe that it is a **direct replacement of circumcision.**

As **one paedobaptist** explains—

*“Those who subscribe to covenantal infant baptism maintain that baptism has now replaced circumcision as the mark of covenant membership, and that baptism’s meaning and application are essentially the same as circumcision’s in the Old Testament period. Included with this is the idea that the children of covenant members today are members of the covenant, as in the Old Testament period.”*¹⁰

Given the significant **influence of the Dutch Reformed practice** of infant baptism upon the thinking of many people in our country, **we’ll consider this next Sunday** in a sermon on the biblical case for believer’s baptism.

For now, it is sufficient to **see the great danger of practicing infant baptism** as a **false hope and empty ritual**, just like the Jews did with circumcision.

That brings us, then, to the **second misunderstanding** that Paul needs to correct—the misunderstanding of circumcision.

¹⁰ Cited in Matthew Waymeyer, *A Biblical Critique of Infant Baptism* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Christian Publications, 2008), 10.

2. THE MISUNDERSTANDING OF CIRCUMCISION (28–29)

Paul continues his argument that circumcision was a **false hope and empty ritual** for the Jews by explaining that they not only misunderstood obedience, but even **misunderstood the true nature of the ritual** they were wrongly relying upon.

Look at **verse 28**—

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh.

Here Paul returns to the idea that the **Jews misjudged their spiritual identity**, believing that they were part of the covenant people of God because of their misplaced confidence **possessing the Law and practicing circumcision**.

He says here in **verse 28** that being Jewish and belonging to the people of God is **not a matter of ethnic heritage**.

Using the **same external/ internal contrast** as he did to present the correct understanding of obedience, Paul presents the correct understanding of circumcision as a **distinguishing mark of a true Jew**.

To make sense of Paul's argument, we have to understand that he is **distinguishing between unbelieving Jews** whose rejection of righteousness through faith excluded them from the covenant people of God **and believing Jews** who were not only ethnic descendants of Abraham but also part of the true covenant people of God.¹¹

Though Gentiles can also become members of the people of God through faith in Christ, **Paul is focussed narrowly** on the Jews and the distinction between believing and unbelieving Jews.

As Paul argues, this is a distinction between **being a true Jewish and being a false Jew**.

The difference between the two categories is that **true Jews** are marked by the internal circumcision of the heart and the **false Jews** are marked by the external circumcision of the flesh alone.

At this point, Paul is **NOT focussing on the believing Gentiles** and is certainly not making an argument that everyone who is circumcised of heart is a Jew, **as if Gentiles become spiritual or metaphorical Jews**.

Rather, he is arguing that a Jew **must add a circumcised heart** to his **ethnic heritage** and his **physical circumcision** in order for God to consider him a true Jew—a true member of His covenant people.

¹¹ Some people think this statement teaches that every Christian is a Jew, but what it really teaches is that every Jew is not a Jew. No man can be a Jew unless he is born outwardly as a son of Abraham, and also inwardly in spirit; therefore, a man born only outwardly of Abraham is not a true Jew." Alva J. McClain, *Romans: The Gospel of God's Grace* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1973), 94.

To be clear, Paul was not rejecting the practice of physical circumcision for Jews.

If circumcision was a matter of the Mosaic Law alone, Paul might have pointed to the fact that **the New Covenant Law of Christ has replaced the Old Covenant Law of Moses.**

However, circumcision preceded the Mosaic Law as a **sign of the Abrahamic covenant.**

That is why **Paul opposed the circumcision of Gentiles** who **tried to add the Old Covenant Law** of Moses to their faith.

To them, Paul warned in **Galatians 5:3**—
I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law [Mosaic Law].

Therefore, according to **Galatians 2:3**, Paul refused to compel **Titus the Gentile** to be circumcised.

By contrast, Paul allowed **Timothy the Jew** to be circumcised according to **Acts 16:3**.

When Paul later journeyed to Jerusalem, James told him that some were **falsely reporting** that he was, “**teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs,**” as we read in **Acts 21:21**.

In response, Paul agreed with James that such a report did **NOT accurately represent his teaching** and so he sought to correct the misconception that he opposed the circumcision of Jewish Christians.

You see, Paul put **very little emphasis on such external rituals**, because he rightly understood that what matters is the **obedience of faith from a new heart**.

That's why he could write in **1 Corinthians 7:19**—
Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God.

Similarly, in **Galatians 5:6** he stated—
In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.

Now, to return our focus to **verse 28**, you can see that the mere **“outward”** mark of circumcision **“in the flesh”** does not make anyone truly Jewish.

A true Jew had the ethnic heritage of belonging to Abraham's descendants, and he had physical circumcision as the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, but he **needed something more in order to be a true Jew**.

A Jew who truly belonged to the covenant people of God had not only the external sign of circumcision, but also the **substance of the internal change of heart**.

That is what Paul clarifies in **verse 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...

One again, **just to be crystal clear**, Paul is NOT suggesting, as some argue, that **every Christian is a spiritual Jew**.

The context is clear that Paul is specifically **addressing his argument** to those who were **literally and physically Jewish**.

That has been the case since **verse 13** when he began, **“But if you bear the name Jew...”**

Here in **verse 29**, he is then **clarifying this distinction** between a true and false Jew, a distinction that is indicated by the **presence or absence of internal, spiritual circumcision of the heart**.

It was always God’s intention that the Jews who were truly part of His covenant people would be **marked by both** the external sign of physical circumcision and the internal substance of spiritual circumcision of the heart.

That’s why we read in **Deuteronomy 30:6**—

Yahweh your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your seed, to love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.

In fact, Paul’s argument in **verse 29** captures this reality of Deuteronomy that the **circumcision of the heart is something that only God can do**.

That is why Paul says that **“circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter...”**

The Holy Spirit is the One who changes the hearts of God’s people, giving them a new, circumcised heart that **produces the obedience of faith**.

For an ethnic Jew, this is the mark of being a true Jew who belongs to the covenant people of God.

The fact that there is a distinction between a true and a false Jew, based on God's work in the heart **also implies** that membership to the people of God is **ultimately a matter of God's sovereign election**.

Paul will explain that in great detail later in the letter where he begins the lengthy argument of **chapters 9–11** by stating in **Romans 9:6–8**—

⁶ **They are not all Israel who are descended from Israel;**

⁷ **nor are they all children because they are Abraham's seed, but: "through Isaac your seed will be named."**

⁸ **That is, the children of the flesh are not the children of God, but the children of the promise are considered as seed.**

At this stage in Paul's letter, though, his emphasis is on the **nature of true circumcision of the Jew**—**an external sign** of the flesh and **an internal substance** of heart.

True circumcision is the mark of those who are part of the people of God.

If the Jews had understood this, **they would not have falsely put their hope in an empty ritual**.

Instead, they **misjudged their spiritual identity** as being right with God and belonging to His people because they **focussed on what was external**.

They did not understand that the obedience of faith from a new heart is what makes you a member of God's people.

As you look at **verse 29**, it is also important to see the **contrast between the Spirit and the letter of the Law**.

The problem with the Mosaic Law is that it is **inadequate to produce obedience from a new heart**.

Indeed, Paul's emphasis on the Holy Spirit circumcising the heart as **the Law is unable to do** points to the **shift from the Old, Mosaic Covenant to the New Covenant**.¹²

Turn quickly to **Jeremiah 31:31-33** as we see the **superior promises of the New Covenant** that focus on what is internal, not just external—

31 “Behold, days are coming,” declares Yahweh, “when I will cut a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah,

32 not like the covenant which I cut with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, but I was a husband to them,” declares Yahweh.

33 “But this is the covenant which I will cut with the house of Israel after those days,” declares Yahweh: “I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

That is why the Jews rejected the gospel—the good news of the New Covenant—because they **misunderstood circumcision as external**, instead of understanding it as a sign which pointed to the internal substance of a changed heart.

¹² “The contrast between the letter and Spirit is a salvation-historical one.” Schreiner, *Romans*, 151.

Finally, as we look at the **end of Romans 2:29**, we see that Paul returns again to the **theme of eschatological judgement**.

Here he writes of the true Jew who is **circumcised in heart** when he says—

his praise is not from men, but from God.

This word for “**praise**” refers to the **eschatological reward** of a believer who is justified in the final judgement and then “**praised**” by God.

Paul uses the same language in **1 Corinthians 4:5**—

Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and make manifest the motives of hearts. And then each one's praise will come to him from God.

Paul's brief words, then, **sum up what he has been saying** positively about the one who is judged according to their works and found to be right with God because they are doers of the Law.

These are the ones who will be justified, because these are the ones whose lives are **characterised by the obedience of faith** that is produced by the new hearts given to them by the Holy Spirit.

Now he assures the ones who are right with God through faith that not only will there be **a final verdict of not guilty** in the future judgement, but there will **even be future reward**.

This is **the praise of God** bestowed on those who do not misplace their confidence in empty rituals, but **rightly understand obedience and circumcision**.

The one who will be praised is the one whose circumcised heart bears the fruit of obedience to the Law of Christ.

Even though **Paul's focus has been on the Jew**, that is the **same standard that God will use** for us as Gentiles for He judges and rewards without partiality, as we have learnt.

So if you want to be **both right with God and rewarded by Him** in the final judgement, then you must **demonstrate the obedience of a changed heart**.

While we as Gentiles **do NOT bear the physical sign** of circumcision in the flesh, if we are truly part of God's covenant people then we will have the **spiritual substance of circumcision in the heart**.

Unlike the external ritual, the internal reality of a circumcised heart is one that **every believer, male and female, bears**.

So learn from the misunderstanding of the Jews that your **focus should be on the heart**, as we read earlier in **1 Corinthians 7:19**—

Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God.

Your assurance that you belong to the people of God must come, then, not from the **false hope and empty ritual** of practicing **circumcision or baptism or communion**, or any other external religious act that can be **performed without a new heart**.

Your assurance that you will be praised by God in the future judgement must come from the **clear evidence that He has given you a new heart**.

CONCLUSION

As we conclude, our study of **Romans 2:25–29** has revealed the **two misunderstandings** that led the Jews to practice circumcision as no more than **false hope and empty ritual**.

They misunderstood the **true nature of obedience** and they misunderstood the **true nature of circumcision**.

You need to **avoid the same misunderstandings** so that, like the Jews, **you do not misjudge your identity** as belonging to the people of God.

If you are truly part of God's covenant people, then you will **obey the Law of Christ from a new heart**.

If, like the Jews, you have been **misplacing your confidence in all the externals** of coming to church, learning about the Bible, and performing Christian rituals then, as Paul has been arguing, **you need the gospel**.

The good news is that **God can give you a new heart**, one that is circumcised so that it produces faith in Christ and obedience to His Law.

For all who demonstrate this obedience of faith from a new heart, **we have the certain hope and confident expectation** of being declared right with God in the final judgement and **rewarded by Him for being a true member of His covenant people**.

BENEDICTION

*Now may Yahweh,
Creator of heaven and earth,
the keeper of Israel and your keeper,
keep your going out and your coming in
from now on and for all time.
Amen.¹³*

¹³ Dale Ralph Davis, *Grace Be with You: Benedictions from Dale Ralph Davis*, New Edition (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2019), 20.

2:25	For indeed circumcision is of value	← if you	practice	the Law,	Explains 23–24
b	but	↓ if you	are a transgressor	of the Law,	Condition of 25a
c	your circumcision has become uncircumcision :				Condition of 25d
d	So if the uncircumcised man	observes	the righteous requirements of the Law,	Contrast with 25a	
2:26	will not his uncircumcision	be counted as circumcision ?		Condition of 26b	
b	And he who is physically uncircumcised	← if he fulfills the Law	who [...] are a transgressor of the Law?	Inferences of 25	
2:27			← through the letter of the Law	Describes subject of 27a	
b			and circumcision	Describes object of 27a	
c				Attendant circumstances of 27c	
d					
e					
2:28	For he is not a Jew who is	one	outwardly,	Reason for 26–27	
b	nor is circumcision that which is	outward in the flesh.			
2:29	But he is a Jew	who is	one		
b	and circumcision is that which is	← by	of the heart,	Contrast to 28	
c		not by	the Spirit,		
d			from men,	Describes 19a–d	
e	and his praise is not		from God.	Contrast with 29e	
f	but				



STEADFAST
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Sermon Notes

Introduction

Today, as we study Romans 2:25–29, we'll see Paul correct two misunderstandings of the Jews in order to expose their practice of circumcision as no more than false hope and empty ritual.

1. The misunderstanding of obedience (25–27)

2. The misunderstanding of circumcision (28–29)

Conclusion