

Romans 2:28-29

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Just because someone appears to be following God outwardly, through physical circumcision and other outward actions, that does not mean that he or she is following God and pursuing righteous living. True righteousness occurs from the inside out.

Paul continues to address the competing Jewish “authorities” who are slandering his message (Romans 3:8). He addresses the Roman believers whose faith is being proclaimed throughout the world (Romans 1:8). The competitors’ core claim of authority seems to be rooted in their Jewishness as well as their knowledge of the Bible, particularly the Mosaic Law.

It will also become clear that a major part of the claim of these competing Jewish “authorities” is that these Roman believers are lacking because they aren't physically circumcised and are not following the Jewish rules and ways (including being under the authority of the competing Jewish “authorities”). Paul now introduces a different understanding of what it means to be a Jew: *For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh* (v 28).

Paul is, of course, also Jewish, a Pharisee, and a “Hebrew of Hebrews” (Philippians 3:5). It is important to note that Paul maintained his Jewishness, following Jewish customs, throughout his ministry (Acts 28:17). However, Paul placed no basis for his calling or his authority in his being Jewish, but in his being called by Jesus (Romans 1:1).

Circumcision is the practice of removing the foreskin of the male penis with a knife. This practice was instituted by God for Abraham and his descendants, as a sign of His covenant with them (Genesis 17:10-12). Therefore, Paul is here making a major claim, that to be a Jew is no longer to enter God’s covenant through the physical act of *circumcision* (*outwardly*).

Rather, God is calling people to enter into a new covenant with Him through an inward circumcision of the heart: *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; and his praise is not from men, but from God* (v 29). Instead of the foreskin being removed to show one is set apart, now the *heart* needs to be set apart as unto God.

Instead of a knife removing skin from the flesh, the *Spirit* needs to remove sin from the *heart*. This comes about through faith. Paul will assert that this is not something new, as Abraham himself was declared righteous in the sight of God by faith, many years prior to being circumcised (Romans 4:2-3). It was also many generations later that God instituted the Mosaic law, as Moses led Israel out of Egypt approximately 500 years after Abraham was circumcised.

Paul closes this segment of his argument against the competing Jewish “authorities” by contrasting the things the “authorities” emphasize with the things God actually cares about. The competing Jewish “authorities” emphasize outward “goodness,” things observed by men, including religious ceremonial activities such as circumcision. But God observes the heart:

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; and his praise is not from men, but from God (v 29).

God emphasizes inward things *of the heart*. The competing Jewish “authorities” elevate *the letter* of the law, and the *praise* that is *from men*. But God cares about *the spirit* of the law, and the *heart*. The *heart* is the seat of choosing how we look at things, our perspective. The Greek word translated *heart* here is “kardia.”

- Jesus said that anyone who lusts after a woman has already committed adultery in his “kardia” (Matthew 5:28). This shows that the *heart* is where we choose a perspective of what is in our best interest, what will bring us fulfillment.
- Jesus said that where we put our treasure, that is where our “kardia” will also be. This indicates that our *heart* is the center of our affection—where we focus, and set priorities.
- Jesus knew the thoughts of others, that they were thinking evil thoughts, and asked them why they thought evil in their “kardias”—their “hearts.”

Humans can have an evil heart, filled with self-seeking and exploitation, while attempting to keep up appearances through following rules. Typically, what such humans will do is accuse others of breaking the rules in order to cover up their own indiscretions.

Man’s motive to convey outward “religiosity” and obey the letter of the law is to gain praise from men. Keeping the spirit of the law and serving others from the heart is what pleases God. In order to actually purify our thoughts and intents, we need a new “kardia”—one that is circumcised (set apart) into a new covenant, through God’s *Spirit*.

One theme that Paul will weave throughout this letter to the believers in Rome (one of the themes of his entire ministry) is the importance of focusing on pleasing God rather than pleasing people. We saw this already in Paul’s comments on the subject in Romans 2:5–8, where Paul elevates “patient continuance in doing good” so that we can gain “glory, honor, and immortality” in the eyes of God.

Here Paul executes a rhetorical jujitsu move on the competing Jewish “authorities” who are, essentially, claiming that in order to be righteous one must become Jewish through following the law. Here Paul says “These Roman believers who have a circumcised heart are the true Jews.” The competing Jewish “authorities” need to become the students rather than asserting themselves as teachers.

Biblical Text

28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. 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; and his praise is not from men, but from God.