

Romans 3:1

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/rom/rom-3/romans-31/>

If God cares about faith and not works or heritage, what advantage do the Jewish people have? And if God cares about the heart of the individual and not merely outward actions, what benefit is circumcision?

In chapter 2, Paul switches from addressing his direct audience—the Roman believers—and instead addresses a general “O Man” who judges others, pointing out that “O Man” does all the things he judges others for. Paul made clear the “O Man” he had in mind were the Jewish authorities slandering his message (Romans 2:8). In 3:1, he resumes speaking directly to the Gentile Roman believers whose “faith is being proclaimed throughout the world” (Romans 1:8), the same people to whom Paul addresses this letter.

The rhetorical question *then what advantage has the Jew?* follows the dismantling of the Jewish authorities he accomplished in Romans chapter 2. Paul will answer his own question by asserting “Great in every respect” (v 2).

Paul made clear that God does not primarily care about obedience to rules, or about physical circumcision; God cares about circumcision of the heart, a heart intent to follow Him. Paul rejected the authority claimed by these Jews—who are lawbreakers yet criticize others for breaking the law.

These “authorities” claim to derive authority from being Jewish, a notion that Paul has also debunked. It then seems appropriate to address the obvious question of whether the Jewish people are, therefore, without advantage from their heritage.

Paul asks the same question in two different ways. In addition to asking *what advantage has the Jew*, the second time, he asks *Or what is the benefit of circumcision?* Circumcision was the ceremonial exercise God gave to Abraham as a sign that Israel was His chosen people, like a wedding ring for His bride. God asks His people, Abraham’s offspring through Isaac, to obey this custom of circumcision (Genesis 17:10). God gave Israel a very special role to play to benefit humanity, to show them a better way to live, to live in a love-your-neighbor culture rather than an exploit-one-another culture (Exodus 19:6).

The way Paul’s argument in chapter 2 reads, it seems apparent that part of what the Jewish authorities were arguing is that the Roman Gentile believers must be circumcised and follow the Jewish laws in order to live justly and righteously. However, Paul and the other Apostles and the elders of the Jerusalem church had already come to an agreement that making Gentiles follow the Jewish laws was, in fact, unnecessary (Acts 15). Paul does not assert that fact here, which suggest that these competing Jewish “authorities” had circumvented this agreement. Some of the believing Pharisees who thought it was necessary to be circumcised in order be saved might have taken it upon themselves to negate the Acts 15 agreement (Acts 15:5).

But in Paul, these opponents faced a formidable opponent, as Paul insisted believers are justified only through faith (Romans 4:1-3). Believers are justified by faith, but also sanctified by walking in faith. Paul has already made clear in his thesis statement that just living (or righteousness) is gained through living by faith (Romans 1:16–17). Now he continues his assertion by answering objections, one by one. Since circumcision is of no benefit in either justification or sanctification, then does that mean Jews have no *advantage*? Far from it.

Biblical Text

1 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision?