

Romans 2:17-29 Relying on your own religion – the Jew

I want to begin with a short lesson in Bible interpretation! The sentence,

The lady hit the man with the umbrella!

... can have two meanings! We can be sure that *the lady hit the man*, but we can't know if she hit the man with *her* umbrella, or if she hit the man *who had* an umbrella, without more information.

For example, if we read before, *There was an umbrella lying in the corner of the room, and the lady hit the man with the umbrella*, this now indicates that the lady used the umbrella as a weapon!

Or, if we read after, *The lady hit the man with the umbrella which he had tried to hide behind*, this now indicates that the umbrella was the man's.

We face the same dilemma in reading the Bible. We can usually understand the basic message – the message of salvation (like, *the lady hit the man*.) But we need more information and context to go deeper. Often the context is forthcoming, for example by reading what comes before or after the verse or passage in question. But at other times (e.g. Romans 2:17-29!) the meaning may not be so clear and genuine Spirit-filled Christians may disagree.

Philippians 2:2 *then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.*

Although we may differ, we can still be likeminded in the sense of, *of having the same love* – that is, knowing the same love of Christ that has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit; and we can *be one in spirit and purpose*, in the sense that we desire to live to glorify our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Yet, when we differ, we must do so with humility and patience (Philippians 3:15).

Romans 2:17-29 is a passage where context is everything. It is a very Jewish context, which isn't familiar to us, making things more difficult. Paul is addressing the Jew (2:17) who relies on his privileged position as a Jew, yet fails to live up to the ethical standards he preaches. Paul addresses the arrogance and hypocrisy of this kind of Jew, who must have been represented at Rome in some way.

But we should note that Paul is also paving the way to address the arrogance of Jesus believing Gentiles as well who believed God had done away with His chosen people, the Jews. This is discussed in chapters 9-11.

In **2:17-20** Paul discusses what it means to be a good Jew. I suppose it's a bit like thinking about what it means to be a good friend: loyal, dependable, supportive in bad times as well as good. But your friend doesn't live up to these expectations. Likewise in **2:21-23** Paul says in effect, *"You don't practice what you preach!"* As a result, *"God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you"* (2:24). The name of the game is hypocrisy!

But was hypocrisy just a 1st century Jewish problem? Certainly not! Some say that the church is full of hypocrites. Well, maybe, but it is also a great place to get forgiven of our hypocrisy!

However Jesus had a much bigger vision for the believing community than to be just a place for recovering hypocrites! He said,

John 13:35 *By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.*

The religious man in Romans 2 doesn't have the love of God in his heart. This is because he is relying only on his religion, and especially on circumcision. **2:25-27** shows that the rite of circumcision has value, but only for the Jew who observes the law. I believe Paul is speaking about observance to the law in a way that is humanly possible, for the passage to make sense. This is despite the fact that many Protestant commentators say or imply that Paul speaks of an observance of the law that is actually impossible (c.f. James 2:10).

Nevertheless the observance of the law Paul is talking about can be compared to that of Abraham, the man of faith. After he died, God said about Abraham,

Genesis 26:5 *Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws.*

Well, that's surprising for us! But it is also fascinating because this was before the law was given. Compare Genesis 26:5 with Deuteronomy 11:1. This shows that the requirements of the law were written on Abraham's heart (Romans 2:15). But did Abraham keep the law perfectly? No! We know he sinned, for example when he lied about his wife Sarah. Nevertheless circumcision was of value to Abraham as a sign of the covenant because he loved God and his obedience was mixed with faith (see Romans 1:5).

Note the difference between legalism and obedience: Legalism = to "observe the law" to earn God's salvation. Obedience = to "observe the law" out of love for God once you are saved by grace.

Relying simply on the ritual of circumcision (=being a Jew) for God's favour is of no use at all. Likewise being baptised by full immersion is useless if it is not mixed with faith. Constantine put off baptism until his death bed so that he wouldn't sin afterwards! But there's no rite that can save.

John the Baptist addressed this attitude of religious pride among his Jewish brethren,

Matthew 3:9 - *And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham as our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.*

In **2:28-29** Paul shows that heritage or parentage doesn't cut it with God. But we must be careful in interpreting these verses. Imagine a group of British people, and you tell them, *To be truly British is to believe in the monarchy!* You don't mean that those in your British audience who disagree aren't British. You are just expressing a view – btw this is just an example!

The main point is, that just because Paul is saying that the real point about being Jewish is circumcision of the heart by the Spirit, he doesn't mean that those who disagree or resist the Spirit aren't Jews. They are. And he doesn't mean that Gentile believers are spiritual Jews either. They are still Gentiles, from wherever. Rather Paul is speaking to his fellow Jews about spiritual circumcision, which deals with the problem of the sinful heart, which they could have known about:

Deuteronomy 30:6 *And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.*

I believe this is the same work of the Spirit as Jesus taught when he said, *You must be born again.* Jesus expressed surprise that Nicodemus as a teacher in Israel wasn't aware of this teaching.

Paul likewise, using the language of spiritual circumcision rather than being born again, is reminding the Jew of something he should have known. This is a lesson for all of us, for then,

Romans 2:29 *our praise is not from men, but from God.*