



Romans 2:12-29 (ESV)

¹² For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³ For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. ¹⁴ For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵ They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them ¹⁶ on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

¹⁷ But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God ¹⁸ and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; ¹⁹ and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— ²¹ you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? ²² You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. ²⁴ For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”

²⁵ For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. ²⁶ So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? ²⁷ Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. ²⁸ For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. ²⁹ But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

Romans 2:12-29 (HCSB)

¹² All those who sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all those who sinned under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³ For the hearers of the law are not righteous before God, but the doers of the law will be declared righteous. ¹⁴ So, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, instinctively do what the law demands, they are a law to themselves even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵ They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts. Their consciences confirm this. Their competing thoughts will either accuse or excuse them ¹⁶ on the day when God judges what people have kept secret, according to my gospel through Christ Jesus.

¹⁷ Now if you call yourself a Jew, and rest in the law, boast in God, ¹⁸ know His will, and approve the things that are superior, being instructed from the law, ¹⁹ and if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light to those in darkness, ²⁰ an instructor of the ignorant, a teacher of the immature, having the full expression of knowledge and truth in the law— ²¹ you then, who teach another, don't you teach yourself? You who preach, "You must not steal"—do you steal? ²² You who say, "You must not commit adultery"—do you commit adultery? You who detest idols, do you rob their temples? ²³ You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? ²⁴ For, as it is written: The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.

²⁵ For circumcision benefits you if you observe the law, but if you are a lawbreaker, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. ²⁶ Therefore if an uncircumcised man keeps the law's requirements, will his uncircumcision not be counted as circumcision? ²⁷ A man who is physically uncircumcised, but who fulfills the law, will judge you who are a lawbreaker in spite of having the letter [of the law] and circumcision. ²⁸ For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, and [true] circumcision is not something visible in the flesh. ²⁹ On the contrary, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart—by the Spirit, not the letter. That man's praise is not from men but from God.

English Standard Version Bible - *Study Bible*¹

Romans 2:12-29

2:12 All will be judged according to the standard they had. The Gentiles will **perish** (i.e., face final judgment) because of their sin (cf. [vv. 14-15](#)) even though they are **without the law** (they don't have the written laws of the OT). The Jews are not spared judgment simply because they possess the law (of the OT), for those who transgress the law will be **judged** for their transgressions.

2:13 Paul reaffirms the principle enunciated in [vv. 6-11](#), that the **doers of the law** are the ones **who are righteous before God**, and that their justification **will be** pronounced on the last day.

2:14-16 Some have suggested that these verses speak of Gentile obedience that leads to salvation (cf. [vv. 7, 10](#)). It is clear, however, that Paul explains here why Gentiles **who do not have the law** will face judgment apart from the law (see [v. 12](#)). The reason it is fair for God to judge them for their evil is that God's law is **written on their hearts**, so that their consciences attest to what is right and what is wrong in their behavior. Paul does not imply that the testimony of human conscience is always a perfect moral guide (for people have **conflicting thoughts** about their moral behavior, sometimes excusing themselves from wrongdoing), but the very existence of this testimony is sufficient to render people accountable to God. (Elsewhere Paul indicates that people's consciences can be distorted by sin; see [1 Cor. 8:7, 10](#); [10:29](#); [1 Tim. 4:2](#); [Titus 1:15](#).)

2:16 **my gospel**. Not Paul's alone, but the gospel that he preaches.

2:17-24 The Jews are indicted for failing to practice what they preach.

2:17-20 Paul details the privileges of the Jews as the elect people of God. Their advantages are genuine, for God has given them his law and hence they are able to instruct the Gentiles with the truths God revealed to them.

2:21-24 Paul zeros in on the main problem with the Jews. They fail to practice the law they proclaim, and hence they will face judgment. Their boast in God is nullified by their failure to obey him. Obviously, Paul is not accusing *all* Jews of stealing, committing adultery, and robbing temples. It is possible that Paul's critique of the Jews is similar to what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount ([Matt. 5:21-48](#)), so that the Jews are criticized for not observing the true intent of the law. But it is more likely that Paul is speaking literally of Jewish disobedience, citing glaring examples to illustrate the principle that the Jews transgress the very law they treasure and teach.

2:22 **rob temples**. Robbing temples was a common crime in the ancient world because temples housed expensive articles that could be sold for profit. Since the law taught that temples were idolatrous and Jews should not be in them or treasuring things from them (see [Deut. 7:25-26](#)), the Jewish plundering of pagan temples would involve not just stealing but self-defilement as well.

1. Lane T. Dennis, ed., *ESV Study Bible, The: English Standard Version*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Bibles, 2008), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Romans 2".

[2:24](#) Because they violated the law, the Jews were exiled by God and were therefore reviled by the Gentiles (Paul adapts phrases from the Septuagint translation of [Isa. 52:5](#); cf. [Ezek. 36:20-23](#)). This dishonored God because they were known as his people. In Paul's time their sins did not lead to exile but still led Gentiles to dishonor the God whom the sinful Jews claimed to follow.

[2:25](#) The Jews were inclined to believe that they would be spared at the last judgment by virtue of their circumcision. **Circumcision** was required of all Jewish males for entrance into the covenant ([Gen. 17:9-14](#); [Lev. 12:3](#)), and hence it was likely viewed as a form of covenant protection. **uncircumcision**. Paul argues, however, that those who violate the law are counted before God as uncircumcised. In other words, they are outside the covenant and therefore destined for judgment. Circumcision would be of **value** (Gk. *ōphelēō*) for salvation if the circumcised would **obey the law** perfectly, but no one can do that. Paul takes up the issue of circumcision again in [Rom. 4:9-16](#); [Gal. 2:3-5](#); [5:2-12](#); [6:12-15](#).

[2:26](#) On the other hand, an **uncircumcised** person who keeps the moral norms of the law will be counted as circumcised, i.e., a member of the covenant people.

[2:27](#) And those (uncircumcised) Gentiles who keep the law will stand at the judgment and **condemn** (either literally or by the testimony of their good deeds) the Jews who had the covenantal advantages of the law (**the written code**) and circumcision.

[2:28](#) [Verses 28-29](#) function as the ground (**For**) of [vv. 26-27](#). In striking contrast to the Jewish beliefs of his day, Paul claims that true Jewishness and genuine circumcision are not ethnic or physical matters.

[2:29](#) True Jewishness and true circumcision are matters **of the heart**. They are the work of the Holy Spirit. The letter/Spirit contrast occurs three times in Paul (see also [7:6](#); [2 Cor. 3:6](#)) and always compares the old era of redemptive history with the new age inaugurated by Jesus Christ. The law is described as **letter** because it cannot and does not transform anyone. The reference to the work of the **Spirit** demonstrates that the obedience described in [Rom. 2:26-27](#) and in [vv. 7, 10](#) is the result of the Spirit's work. Therefore, it is not the obedience of the unregenerate that is in view here but rather the obedience of those who, by the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, have repented of their hard hearts ([v. 5](#)), who have received the Holy Spirit, and who are being enabled by the Spirit to live a new life characterized by obedience to God.

Holman Christian Standard Bible - Study Bible²

Romans 2:12-29

[2:12](#) This verse introduces the Mosaic **law** into the discussion of the coming judgment. The law will be considered throughout the remainder of Romans. The Jews saw the Mosaic law as key in the difference between Jews and Gentiles; Paul teaches that the law does not save a person but only reveals sin as people fall short of the law's requirements. Thus in the judgment, the possession of the law will be a basis of condemnation.

[2:13](#) [Deuteronomy 6:4](#) calls Israel to "listen" to the declaration of God's identity, but [Dt 6:5](#) follows up by saying that merely listening is not enough. One must love God with the whole heart, which entails obedience. And yet no one will be **declared righteous** by obeying the law, for no one obeys the law perfectly ([3:20,23](#); [Gal 2:16](#); [Jms 2:8-11](#)). The only incorrupt doer of the law was Jesus, the righteous One.

[2:14-15](#) The **Gentiles** do not have the Mosaic law as a moral guide, but they do have an inner **law** that informs their conscience. All humans have this **instinctively** as a component of their being created in God's image ([Gen 1:26](#)). Kant, the philosopher, spoke of "the starry heavens above and the moral law within." This moral law will **accuse or excuse** daily moral choices, but ultimately demonstrates that all people fall short of God's holiness.

[2:16](#) God knows every **secret**, and Jesus will be the final judge ([Jn 5:22-30](#); [Ac 17:31](#)). The coming judgment will be: according to truth, proportional to the rejection of revelation received, according to deeds done, without partiality, and in response to the **gospel**.

[2:17-20](#) **Jew** was the name given to people who returned to Judea from exile, but later it was extended to cover all Hebrew people (Israelites) wherever they lived. Paul listed eight grounds on which Jews rested their sense of moral superiority over the Gentiles; three times he cited the law as a grounds. The Jews believed that God had granted them special privileges and given them a mission to bring light to the Gentiles ([Isa 42:6-7](#)). True enough. And yet Jesus taught, "Much will be required of everyone who has been given much. And even more will be expected of the one who has been entrusted with more" ([Lk 12:48](#)). Furthermore, Jesus warned the religious leaders, "On the outside you seem righteous to people, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" ([Mt 23:28](#)). Mere possession of the law does not win divine favor.

[2:21-23](#) Following Jesus' example, Paul exposed Jewish hypocrisy. He did so with a series of five rhetorical questions that indicted his people for lacking essential righteousness. Paul did not mean that every Jew committed all these sins but that all transgress the law and lack the righteousness to enter God's presence. Jesus taught that even the thought of **adultery** violates the law ([Mt 5:27-28](#)). Paul knew from his own experience that his heart was full of covetousness ([Rm 7:7-10](#)) and therefore unrighteous. There are examples of all five literal violations from contemporary accounts, including a famous case in Rome of sacrilege. The history of the Jewish nation was full of unrighteous acts. Stephen asked, "Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?" ([Ac 7:52](#)). The religious leaders of the nation were instrumental in putting Jesus to death, Stephen was stoned by the Sanhedrin, and James the Just (half-brother of Jesus) was killed in the temple area.

2. Jeremy Royal Howard, ed., HCSB Study Bible, (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2010), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Romans 2".

[2:24](#) Paul cited [Isa 52:5](#) from the Greek OT (the Septuagint, or LXX) as support that Jewish sin resulted in God's name being dishonored among the pagan nations when the Jews were defeated and exiled. To pagan perception, Yahweh seemed powerless since He did not protect His people.

[2:25-29](#) **Circumcision** was a sign and seal of a covenant that God made with Israel ([Ex 12:44-49](#)). The rite went back to Abraham and the covenant God made with him ([Gen 17:9-14](#)). Circumcision became a badge of Jewish identity and, it was thought, a guarantee of salvation. Some later rabbis even taught that Abraham sat at the entrance to Gehenna ("hell") and would not permit any uncircumcised Jew to enter there. By implication, the way you lived made no difference. In a similar way, some Christian groups have believed that the rite of baptism saves, and so baptism was delayed until the end of life to make sure all sins were "washed." But Paul declared that circumcision (and by extension, baptism) without obedience is empty. Furthermore, Abraham was a man of faith who was accepted by God long before he was circumcised ([Gen 15:1-20](#)). The true Jew is one who has a spiritual **circumcision... of the heart**.

NLT Life Application Study Bible³

Romans 2:12-29

[2:12-15](#) People are condemned not for what they don't know but for what they do with what they know. Those who know God's written Word and his law will be judged by them. Those who have never seen a Bible still know right from wrong, and they will be judged because they violated those standards that their own consciences dictated. God's law is written within them.

[2:12-15](#) If you traveled around the world, you would find evidence in every society and culture of God's moral law. For example, all cultures prohibit murder, and yet in all societies that law has been broken. We belong to a stubborn, sinful race. We know what is right, but we insist on doing what is wrong. It is not enough to know what is right; we must also do it. Admit to yourself and to God that you frequently fail to live up to your own standards (much less to God's standards). That's the first step to forgiveness and healing.

[2:17ff](#) Paul continues to argue that all stand guilty before God. After describing the fate of the unbelieving, pagan Gentiles, he moves to admonish God's people. Despite their knowledge of God's will, they were guilty because they, too, refuse to live by it. Those of us who have grown up in Christian families may know what God's Word says. But Paul says that if we do not live up to what we know, we are no better off than unbelievers.

[2:21, 22](#) Paul explained to the Jews that they needed to teach *themselves*, not others, by their law. They knew the law so well that they had learned how to excuse their own actions while criticizing others. But the law is more than a set of rules—it is a guideline for living according to God's will. It is also a reminder that we cannot please God without a proper relationship to him. As Jesus pointed out, withholding what rightfully belongs to someone else is stealing ([Mark 7:9-13](#)), and anyone who even looks at a woman with lust in his eye has committed adultery with her in his heart ([Matthew 5:27, 28](#)). Before we accuse others, we must look at ourselves and see if sin, in any form, exists within us.

3. *Life Application Study Bible*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1988), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 1897-98.

[2:21-27](#) These verses are a scathing criticism of hypocrisy. It is much easier to tell others how to behave than to behave properly ourselves. It is easier to say the right words than to allow them to take root in our own life. Do you ever advise others to do something you are unwilling to do yourself? Make sure that your actions match your words.

[2:24](#) If you claim to be one of God's people, your life should reflect what God is like. When you disobey God, you dishonor his name. People may even blaspheme or profane God's name because of you. What do people think about God as they watch your life?

[2:25-29](#) *Circumcision* refers to the sign of God's special covenant with his people. All Jewish males were required to submit to this rite ([Genesis 17:9-14](#)). According to Paul, being a circumcised Jew meant nothing if the person didn't obey God's laws. On the other hand, the uncircumcised Gentiles would receive God's love and approval if they kept God's law. Paul goes on to explain that a true Jew (one who pleases God) is not someone who has been circumcised but someone whose heart is right with God and obeys him.

[2:28, 29](#) To be a Jew meant you were in God's family, an heir to all his promises. Yet Paul made it clear that membership in God's family is based on internal, not external, qualities. All whose hearts are right with God are true Jews—that is, part of God's family (see also [Galatians 3:7](#)). Attending church or being baptized, confirmed, or accepted for membership is not enough, just as submitting to circumcision was not enough for the Jews. God desires our heartfelt devotion and obedience (see also [Deuteronomy 10:16](#); [Jeremiah 4:4](#)).

Life Application Concise New Testament Commentary⁴

Romans 2:12-29

[2:12](#) **Gentiles** will be judged on the basis of the knowledge available to them. They won't be condemned for failing to conform to a code of laws they knew nothing about. They will not perish because they didn't have the Jewish law; they will perish because they have sinned. The **Jews** will be judged by God's written law because they had been trained in it. They will be judged for sinning against the **law** that they knew so well. People are condemned not for what they don't know, but for what they do with what they know. Those who know God's written word and his law will be judged by them. Those who have never seen a Bible still know right from wrong; they will be judged guilty because they did not keep even the standards of their own conscience.

[2:13](#) Those faithful Jews who attend the synagogues every Sabbath and hear God's law read over and over may consider themselves to be righteous, but just hearing is not enough, because **it is not merely knowing the law that brings God's approval**. Those who do good ([2:10](#)) and those who **obey the law will be declared right in God's sight**—this includes both Jews and Gentiles (see also [Leviticus 18:5](#) and [James 1:22-25](#)). The obedience that Paul describes is perfect and well beyond our reach. Our being made right with God must be sought and found elsewhere. Paul effectively closes many appealing doors while he describes the only one that leads to eternal life.

4. Barton B. Bruce et al., *Life Application New Testament Commentary*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2001), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 587-589.

[2:14](#) Some **Gentiles** who did not know anything about **God's written law** had moral sensitivity and lived as though following it. They had the law of conscience. The knowledge of God's character was available to them, for they knew **right from wrong**. Their moral awareness will serve in place of the law to judge them.

Paul does not attempt to prove that people are incapable of any good. His point is that not one of us is capable of perfect goodness. At the human level, we all behave more or less in line with the standards of our society. But righteousness is not determined by what most people do, or even by what most people think might be possible for someone who tries very hard. Righteousness is God's standard, God's character. Comparisons with others are of no help when we measure ourselves before God's standard. Ultimately, whatever our background, we will be held accountable by God for our life.

[2:15](#) All cultures and nations, no matter how different, have a common recognition that some things are **right** and others are wrong. Gentiles who do not know God's law have a moral sensitivity in their hearts that matches what God's law requires. A conscience is an inward monitor that lets us know when we have done wrong. What the law does for the Jew, the conscience does for the Gentile, acting as **God's law written within them**.

[2:16](#) The only way to truly judge a person is to judge his or her **secret life**. Some actions that appear good may be wrongly motivated; other, less visible actions may be done with good intentions. In this manner, both Jews and Gentiles will be judged. In the end, **God will judge**. Nothing will have to be explained to God. His judgment will be perfect, based on his perfect knowledge of every action and every motive. God will judge through Jesus Christ (see [John 5:27](#)). The gospel Paul preached included the wonderful message that though judgment is inevitable, it will be conducted through Christ's mediation. For those who are trusting in Christ for their righteousness, God's judgment does not include the fear of exposure and punishment. As Paul later says joyfully, "There is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus" ([8:1](#)).

The Jews and the Law / [2:17-29](#)

Paul knew that among those in Rome who would vigorously agree with his first chapter, there would be legalistic Jews, proud of their heritage as God's chosen people. But their agreement with his case would surely turn to anger as they realized that they were being included in the judgment, as equal members in the fallen human race. Possessing God's law increased both privilege and responsibility. Because these Jews knew more, they were expected to do more. At first they thought they were Paul's allies, but suddenly they were confronted by him.

Those of us who have grown up in a Christian family are the religiously privileged of today. Paul's condemnation applies to us if we do not live up to what we know.

[2:17](#) Paul pointed out that Jews had **God's law**, worshiped the one true God, knew right from wrong, and yet regarded themselves better than all those who didn't have the law (i.e., were not Jews). "**You boast that all is well between yourself and God.**" The kind of knowing and boasting described here is a sham without a life that demonstrates the knowledge. Paul was bluntly asking, "If you claim to be Jewish, why don't you live up to the name?" We who claim to be Christians, do we live up to this name?

[2:18](#) Knowing **what** God **wants** and knowing **right from wrong** are the result of having been **taught his law**. God's word is not only a record of God's will; it is also a guideline to determine what course of action is best for us. Through God's word we can be trained or instructed in how to appreciate what is good. Yet how often do

we, surrounded by a wealth of spiritual resources, live no differently than our pagan neighbors! We need to put our knowledge into action.

2:19 Paul saw these people as dangerously self-confident. It was apparent from their lives that they could not back up their claims. Paul's sarcasm here parallels Jesus' words to the Pharisees, "How terrible it will be for you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. For you cross land and sea to make one convert, and then you turn him into twice the son of hell as you yourselves are" ([Matthew 23:15](#)). A Jew would see himself as **a guide for the blind**, but Jesus repeatedly called them "blind guides" ([Matthew 15:14](#); [23:16](#), [24](#)). They claimed to be **a beacon light**, but were unwilling to recognize the light of the world ([John 9:5](#), [39-41](#)).

2:20 The Jews that Paul had in mind considered themselves not only separate from the Gentiles, but also capable of teaching those whom they considered **ignorant** in spiritual matters. These people knew they had the truth and were proud of it! But assuming the teaching role carries with it heavy responsibility, especially in spiritual training ([James 3:1](#)). Knowing what ought to be taught is only one part of being an effective teacher. Practicing what is taught is the clearest test of a teacher. If you are a teacher, can you pass this test?

2:21-23 Anyone proud of his spiritual background should take a careful look at himself. The Jews were called to be guides of the Gentiles, and salvation is of the Jews ([John 4:22](#)), but their response to God's plan for them had made them arrogant. The Jew of whom Paul was thinking possessed the law and was confident that this position allowed him to teach all those who were ignorant without the law. However, Paul's questions were designed to force the listener to realize that not all Jews could claim such superiority. Many did not understand God's law, had false confidence in it, and could not apply it readily to their daily life. Without God's Spirit and the gospel, they had neither superiority nor all the answers. Having, knowing, and reading the law are not enough.

The Jews needed to **teach** themselves, not others, by their law. The law is more than legalistic minimum requirements—it is a guideline for living according to God's will. It is also a reminder that we cannot please God without a proper relationship to him. The general principle is that it is much easier to tell others how to behave than to behave properly ourselves. As Jesus pointed out, even withholding what rightfully belongs to someone else is stealing ([Mark 7:9-13](#)); and looking on another person with lustful, adulterous intent is **adultery** ([Matthew 5:27-28](#)). Before we accuse others, we must look at ourselves and see if that same sin, in any form, exists within us. The question, **do you steal from pagan temples**, may be making the contrast between condemning **idolatry** while in private valuing them so highly that they become worth stealing. By **knowing** God's law and then **breaking it**, the Jews had given God great **dishonor**. The unmerited honor that God had given Jews by choosing them was being treated with unhealthy pride and outright disrespect.

Each of the questions touches on matters in the Ten Commandments. Theft, adultery, idolatry, and dishonoring God were all prohibited. His assumption is not that every reader would answer yes to each question, but that each reader would find his life spotlighted at least once.

2:24 Those who glory in God's law and brag about their relationship to him and then live in disobedience bring God into disrepute among nonbelievers. Paul quotes from [Isaiah 52:5](#), written about Israel's exile to foreign lands. It was the Jews' rampant evil and flouting of God's law that led to the exile. They had boasted about being God's chosen people, but because of their sin, their nation was destroyed. The Gentiles despised a God who, it appeared, could not save his own people. Paul's parallel was that Jews were again resting with false confidence on their being "chosen" and their possession of God's law. Their sins were still causing Gentiles to blaspheme a God who would choose such a nation.

2:25 Circumcision was fundamental to the Jews—it symbolized the covenant between God and Abraham’s descendants ([Genesis 17:9-14](#)). It was the expression of Israel’s national identity and was a requirement for all Jewish men. Circumcision was a physical reminder to Jews of their national heritage and privilege. Many were confident that it sealed their position with God. But just as having the law did not make a person right before God, neither was circumcision in itself a cause for confidence. To be circumcised was **worth something only if you obey God’s law** (see [Galatians 5:3](#)). To be circumcised and yet break God’s law was no better than not being circumcised at all. What God desires is a pure and obedient heart.

Symbols require some sense of reality in order to be significant; otherwise they are empty. Signing a contract does not take the place of doing the work. In fact, signing a contract and then refusing to carry out its terms is considered a serious breach. It is worse than a failure. It is a deception.

2:26-27 Paul had already pointed out that circumcision was a valuable part of a system governed by obedience. Where there was no obedience, circumcision was of no value. By the same logic, when obedience was present, the real objective was accomplished, even though circumcision had not occurred. In other words, **Gentiles who obey God’s law** are as good in God’s sight as a law-abiding, circumcised Jew and could receive **the rights and honors of being God’s own people**. A Gentile who kept the law would be in a position to condemn a Jew who broke it, no matter how well that Jew knew the law. The Jew who required strict observance to every letter of the law, but was not a doer of the law, was actually a transgressor of that law because he had missed the point.

We must keep in mind that Paul is dealing here with absolutes. Obedience is not a matter of degrees. James saw this clearly: “The person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as the person who has broken all of God’s laws” ([James 2:10](#)). The sharp division that the law creates reveals the startling nature of the gospel. The righteousness we might try to create by living up to the law, circumcised or not, leads to hopelessness. Perfect obedience is beyond us.

2:28-29 Paul is adamant: The **circumcision** that God wanted was not cutting the flesh, and cutting the flesh did not fulfill the law. Paul is not inventing new theology, but urging his readers to re-examine the testimony of the Old Testament Scriptures. To be one of God’s children—a **true Jew**—was not merely to be a circumcised Jew, but to be one who loved God and followed his laws. The kind of Jews God wanted were not those people tied to a heritage, rather people whose lives were pleasing to God. It was a matter of the **heart**. The person whose heart is right with God because of God’s Holy Spirit will be of great value to God. A Jew transformed by God’s Spirit would be living up to his name, for he would be praiseworthy in God’s eyes. He would fulfill what the law required but was powerless to produce.

Study and Discussion Questions



The Jews and the Law - [Romans 2:17-29](#)

Topics: [Approval](#), [Beliefs](#), [Character](#), [Consistency](#), [Hypocrisy](#), [Self-righteousness](#)

Open It

1. What advertisements do you have trouble believing?
2. How would you judge the character of a person who wanted to date your only daughter?
3. *What are some "wrong" reasons a person might have for going to church?

Explore It

4. What special relationship did the Jews have with God? ([2:17-18](#))
5. How did Jews describe themselves in relation to Gentiles? ([2:19-20](#))
6. *Of what did Paul accuse the Jews? ([2:21-24](#))
7. Why would the Gentiles blaspheme God's name because of the Jews? ([2:21-24](#))
8. What was the purpose of circumcision? ([2:25-26](#))
9. What is more important to God than being physically circumcised? ([2:26-27](#))
10. *How did Paul redefine what it means to be a Jew? ([2:28-29](#))
11. What is more important than physical circumcision? ([2:29](#))
12. *What is more important than knowing God's written law? ([2:29](#))
13. Whose approval does a true Jew seek? ([2:29](#))

Get It

14. *How could a person be very religious and yet be lacking a real relationship with God?
15. What are the most important qualities of an effective teacher?
16. How do our actions show others what we genuinely believe?
17. How does hypocrisy in a religious person affect people who observe that person?

18. How could a person be outwardly a Christian and inwardly something else?
19. What is more important than keeping outward standards of Christian behavior?
20. *What makes a person a true Christian?
21. How much does peer pressure from friends and coworkers influence our beliefs and behavior as Christians?

Apply It

22. How can you begin to change some inconsistent behaviors and attitudes in your Christian life this week?
23. *In which of your present situations should you be more concerned about pleasing God than pleasing other people?