Romans Lesson 5 (2018)

**WHAT MAKES YOU THINK YOU ARE SUPERIOR?**

Romans 2:17-3:8

Key Verse: 2:29

“No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person’s praise is not from other people, but from God.”

In the previous passage, 2:1-16, Apostle Paul made it very clear that it’s not just the godless people, idolaters and sexually immoral and perverted who are under God’s wrath and anger. God’s wrath is also upon the critical and judgmental moralists and religious people because of their hypocrisy. In today’s passage, 2:17-3:8, Apostle Paul seems to elaborate his point further by focusing on the Jews who were confident of their ethnicity and religion as God’s chosen people. He actually condemns them because God’s name had been blasphemed among the ungodly people because of their hypocrisy and downfall. Paul also redefines what it means to be a real Jew whom God approves (2:29).

I grew up in the church even though I stopped attending it when I was about to enter high school. One reason I left the church was because I became aware of the constant fighting among the church leaders. Another reason I left the church was that I had discovered that some of the children of the respected elders secretly smoked whenever they were near the church. I wasn’t perfect either. But I thought to myself, *“Well, if this is what I am going to deal within the church, why should I even bother to come to church? What’s the point of being a Christian?”* I thought that most Christians were hypocrites. It’s a sad story. But it can happen anywhere.

The content of today’s passage refers exclusively to the Jews, particularly the Jews who considered themselves special and superior. However, the core of its teaching also applies to all Christians, especially those who are considered to be Bible teachers, ministers, preachers and pastors. Let’s think about why Apostle Paul says the Jews- so called God’s chosen people, were also under God’s wrath, and how we, as Christians, can be authentic and approved by God.

Look at verses 17-20. “Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth.” It seems that Paul was not talking to ordinary Jews but to the Pharisees and the orthodox Jews who had the special sense of God’s calling as instructors of God’s truth, Bible teachers and spiritual guides.

However, Paul does say that having the sense of a special calling or of being Bible teachers, instructors, preachers or pastors is not good enough. Read verses 21-23. “You, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?” It seems that these people were very diligent Bible teachers, instructors and spiritual guides who worked very hard. Probably, some of them were popular preachers and prominent Bible teachers and pastors. Yet, the problem was that in their personal life they didn’t do what they taught others to do. They were hypocrites. In fact, they were like white washed tombs, which looked beautiful on the outside but on the inside were unclean with pride, greed, lust, envy, jealousy and anger. In some sense, they were worse than the Gentiles because of their sin of hypocrisy.

In verse 24, Apostle Paul quotes from Isaiah 52:5 and Ezekiel 36:20, 22. Read verse 24. “As it is written: ‘God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.’” This is a very strong statement against the Jews who considered themselves as God’s holy people. When we think of the people of Israel in the Bible, they were not exemplary people to the Gentiles. Most of them were not truly God-fearing, loving, or compassionate. They were idol worshipers and followed all kinds of sinful desires. In fact, God became a mockery among the Gentiles because of the hypocrisy of His own people, Israel.

The Gentiles said, “These people always talk about truth. They say that we are in darkness but they have the light of God because God gave them the Law of God. But look at their lives? They easily get angry, lie, gossip and are always critical and judgmental. Is that kind of life a result of truth?” Likewise, we often hear some people say, *“Is that Christianity? I don’t want to be a Christian because of them.”* It’s unfortunate that it happens so much.

Look at verses 25-27. “Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law’s requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.” Circumcision was another symbol of the ethnic identity of a Jew. The Jews despised the Gentiles as unclean because they were not circumcised. According to Paul, however, an uncircumcised but God-fearing Gentile was more righteous and pleasing to God than a circumcised but disobedient Jew. In other words, God does not see the cover but the content.

Look at verses 28 and 29. “A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person’s praise is not from other people, but from God.” Originally, when God commanded Abraham to get circumcised, it was a token of Abraham’s obedience and a seal of the covenant between God and Abraham. However, we notice that all the males, including the servants and boys in Abraham’s household, were supposed to be circumcised (Gen.17:15). Ishmael, Abraham’s son by Hagar, also received circumcision even though he was not the son of the covenant. So what does it tell us?

First of all, it tells us that the circumcision of Abraham and the circumcision of others in his household had different meanings. We know that Abraham’s heart was circumcised before he was physically circumcised. He did this because he cut off his petty human desires and self-ambition and accepted God’s will and vision to become the father of many nations (Gen. 17:5). So the real circumcision was the circumcision of the heart, not the circumcision of the flesh. Yet, the religious Jews took great pride in the ritual of physical circumcision itself as if the physical circumcision meant a permanent membership in God’s covenant. But the true circumcision is the circumcision of the heart and those who are to be considered as true Israelites are those who are circumcised both physically and spiritually.

Paul’s redefinition of the true identity of a Jew may sound radical and may even undermine the very foundation of Judaism. But he was not the first one who spoke about the importance of the circumcision of the heart. In fact, God often spoke to the people of Israel about the circumcision of the heart through his servants. First of all, God spoke to them through Moses “Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.” (Deut. 10:16) God also spoke to them through the Prophet Jeremiah, “Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, circumcise your hearts, you people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, or my wrath will flare up and burn like fire because of the evil you have done - burn with no one to quench it.” (Jer. 4:4)

So what is the circumcision of the heart? The circumcision of the heart is internal and changes the heart and inner person through repentance. It’s like performing a spiritual operation on our soul/heart by cutting off the sinful desires, like pride, greed, selfishness, lust and envy. It’s a very painful procedure, yet it will eventually bring true healing, peace and joy to our soul. Most of all, it pleases God. That’s why King David cried out in Psalm 51:16 and 17, “You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.” King David was an authentic Jew because he had the circumcision of the heart.

Likewise, authentic Christians are not necessarily those who attend a good and prestigious church or who speak well and have many spiritual gifts. It’s easy for us to look up famous and powerful Christians who seem to achieve great things in Christian ministry. Yes, they are praiseworthy. Yet, we must know that authentic Christians whom God approves of are not necessarily those who seem to have a lot to show outwardly. Instead, authentic Christians are those whose hearts are broken, humble, meek, and are being transformed by the Spirit. Such people’s praise is not from men but from God.

Now, as we turn to Chapter 3, we find several potential questions that some of the Jews might have had after hearing Paul’s declaration that there is no fundamental difference between being a Jew and a Gentile. Look at verse 1. “What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?” This question can be paraphrased as follows, “Is being a Jew still considered a blessing? If so, what is the blessing of being a Jew if we will be judged just like the Gentiles?” In verse 2, Paul says, “Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.” Paul elaborates the blessings of being a Jew later in 9:1-5. But as of now, he simply was saying that being a Jew has a great advantage because you have and know the very words of God – God’s special revelation. The Jews, especially, knew the messianic prophesies and promises while the Gentiles were given only general revelation through the wonders of nature. The Jews had God’s special revelation. But most of them failed to believe in Jesus the Messiah God sent.

So the question follows in verse 3. “What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God’s faithfulness?” By just reading the NIV translation alone, it’s hard to catch the flow of it. But the question seems to imply that if some Jews failed to respond to God’s will and original call due to their lack of faith, “Will their lack of faith undermine God’s faithfulness?” In other words, “What happened to God’s promise? Did God fail to fulfill his promise?”

Look at verse 4. “Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a lair. As it is written, ‘So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.” Paul was saying that even though the majority of God’s chosen people were unfaithful, God’s promise will not fail. He actually quotes from Psalm 51:4 and 116:11, which is part of what King David wrote. David was a chosen servant, through one of whose descendants the Messiah was promised. But David committed adultery with Bathsheba and killed her husband in order to cover up his sin. God exposed and rebuked his sin through Nathan and David repented with many tears. In spite of David’s sin, God didn’t change his plan but remained faithful in sending the Messiah as one of David’s descendants through Solomon, who was the son of Bathsheba. God is faithful.

Paul’s argument in verses 5-8 is very interesting. Having said that God is faithful, Paul raises another hypothetical question in verse 5. “But if our unrighteousness brings out God’s righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.)” Paul was saying that according to human logic, God appears be unjust in bringing His wrath upon those who contributed their unfaithfulness to fulfill God’s good purpose. But then, Paul quickly comes back by saying in verse 6, “Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world?” In other words, if God is unjust, how could he judge the world? He is not qualified. Look at verse 7, “Someone might argue, ‘If my falsehood enhances God’s truthfulness and so increase His glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?” Some people might think that God should overlook his sin because his sin eventually contributed in fulfilling God’s purpose. Some people might even say, *“It does not matter what evil method you use as long as you can achieve good result.” – “****the end justifies the means*.”** What do you think? Will God buy that kind of situation ethics? No. Paul said that God does not buy such a corruptive idea. They deserve God’s condemnation.

To be honest, I feel that what is said in verses 3:1-8 is very confusing and hard to understand. It’s a very complicated argument. But one thing seems to be very clear in what Paul tries to tell his audience: God is faithful and just in bringing his righteous judgment on those who deserve God’s judgment. God is just and does not show favoritism. He would not overlook even the hint of correction, and no one can avoid His judgment.

Let me close my sermon. In today’s passage, Apostle Paul points out that the Jews, God’s chosen people, who considered themselves as special and superior were hypocrites before God. And because of their sin of hypocrisy and downfall God’s name had been blasphemed among the ungodly. They are under God’s judgment. How can they avoid God’s judgment? Physical circumcision is not enough. They need the circumcision of the heart by the Spirit.

It seems that these days Christianity has an image problem. Many people think, especially those who have had bad experiences with Christians, think that Christians in general are self-righteous, judgmental and hypocritical. We don’t like such criticism. Yet, in fact we have to admit that many self-righteous Christians can be a stumbling block and bad influence to non-believers. What shall we do then? Shall we behave in order to make a good impression on others? No. We also need to circumcise our hearts and be an authentic believer in Christ. As a pastor, I do my best to prepare and share good sermons. If I think my message is good, I feel very happy and secretly expect people to tell me “Thank you, Pastor for your wonderful message.” But delivering a good sermon does not automatically make me superior or an authentic Christian. I can be an authentic Christian only when I practice what I preach. I should carefully examine my heart and circumcise my heart through sincere repentance before God.

I want us to conclude the sermon by reading several verses from Paul’s Epistles. 1 Corinthians 7:19 states “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts.” Galatians 6:15 states, “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, what counts I the new creation.” What matters to God is not our religious activities, how long we have been in the membership of a Christian church or what kind of church we attend. What matters to God is the circumcision of our heart and a new creation. We can be transformed into a new creation when we crucify our sinful nature and live by the Spirit. 2 Corinthians 5:17 states “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” Becoming a new person in Christ is the secret of happiness. May we live an authentic Christian life by circumcising our hearts and becoming a new creation day after day.