

## Class #3: The Privileged Jew

*Romans 2:17 - 3:8*

**The Privileged Jew.** Now Paul turns to the Jew who has been listening to the condemnation of the Gentile and proceeds to show him that he is even more responsible because he has more light than the Gentile. The Jews were the caretakers of the law (vv.17-24), they bore the outward sign of God's covenant (vv.25-29), and they had many clever arguments asserting that the gospel was invalid (ch.3:1-8). With each, they are shown to be more responsible.

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# Religious Knowledge (of the Law) Cannot Shelter the Jew (2:17-24)

## Five Distinct Privileges of the Jew (vv.17-20)

¶ **17** But if <sup>(1)</sup> \*thou\* art named a Jew, and <sup>(2)</sup> retest in the law, and <sup>(3)</sup> makest thy boast in God, **18** and <sup>(4)</sup> knowest the will, and discerningly approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law; **19** and <sup>(5)</sup> hast confidence that thou thyself art a leader of the blind, a light of those who *are* in darkness, **20** an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and of truth in the law: **vv.17-20** Here we have *five things* given by God that the Jews falsely rested in, but that also made them

extremely responsible:

1. **A special name.** The name is the shortened form of Judah, connected with the promised Messiah.
2. **A moral law.** God never gave the law for man to “rest” in. He gave it for man to feel his guilt (Rom. 5:21, Gal. 3:19). Nevertheless it was a privilege because it showed man his need of a Savior outside of himself.
3. **A covenant relationship.** They alone had a relationship with God, not personally like Christians, but they had an external relationship through the law.
4. **A Knowledge of God’s will.** They knew the moral will of God in the issues of life. The conscience of man is like a pair of calipers; it measures my behavior from my moral standard. The law was a “*more excellent*” standard than what the Gentiles had.
5. **A place of responsibility among the nations.** This was a place intended for them by God which they had fallen far short of (Matt. 23:14). It was God’s mind that the Jews would be His instrument to instruct the Gentiles in things pertaining to the kingdom of God. The Jews were much more responsible than the Gentiles, because those who teach the Word of God must practice the things that they teach. The Jews had utterly failed to practice what they preached, a fact proven by their captivity, etc. Yet one day this privilege will be restored to the Jews again (Rom. 11:25-26). They had “*the form*”. It is good to have “*a form*” an outline of the truth (2 Tim. 1:13) but this was an *empty* form. God will approve of a right spirit without the form, but not the form without a right spirit.

## Five Rhetorical Questions to Show the Jews’ Inconsistency (vv.21-24)

**21** <sup>(1)</sup> thou then that teachest another, dost thou not teach thyself? <sup>(2)</sup> thou that preachest not to steal, dost thou steal? **22** <sup>(3)</sup> thou that sayest *man should* not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery? <sup>(4)</sup> thou that abhorrest idols, dost thou commit sacrilege? **23** <sup>(5)</sup> thou who boastest in law, dost thou by transgression of the law dishonour God? **vv.21-23** Paul develops the guilt of the Jew by showing his inconsistency (or, unrighteousness). He begins with five rhetorical questions for the Jew:

1. **With regard to reality.** The application of truth in their practical life was wanting. When teaching is truly received it eventually is practiced (good or bad). The question with the Jews was, were they even receiving the truth?

2. **With regard to *social behavior*.** The Jews' ability to come out of a business deal on top was well known.
3. **With regard to *morality*.** See Matt. 19:9. The Pharisees were putting away their wives for younger models, but keeping a good face through the "divorce clause" in the law; but it was really adultery.
4. **With regard to *idolatry*.** Sacrilege is trafficking in idols. The Jews at this time were making or selling idols (see Acts 19:37, robbers of idol's temples) while having no interest in them themselves. They really had no concern for God's view on idolatry, but they kept up a clean facade.
5. **With regard to *testimony*.** The spirit of the religious man brings shame down on God. They liked telling the Gentiles about their relationship with God (Matt. 23:17), but their open disobedience to the law showed the true disposition of their hearts.

24 For "the name of God is blasphemed on your account among the nations" [Isa. 52:5], according as it is written. v.24 This is a quotation from Isa. 52:5 showing that Israel's captivity caused shame to be brought on the name of Jehovah.

## Religious Ceremony (Circumcision) Cannot Shelter the Jew (2:25-29)

### Circumcision.

As we find in Genesis 17, circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with Abraham, just as the rainbow was the sign of God's covenant with Noah. Circumcision itself did nothing inward for the soul. It was an outward sign of God's covenant pertaining to outward blessing. The sign was consequent on God's unconditional promises made to Abraham and his descendants. Those promises will be fulfilled ultimately by Christ, because God is faithful. The sign of circumcision was not given to Abraham as a legal thing, but rather how Abraham might respond to the grace of God.<sup>1</sup> Many years later, when the law was given with its conditional promises, it included circumcision as part of the ceremonial law. This linked circumcision with the moral law; "*for I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law*" (Gal. 5:3). Israel, in breaking the law, disqualified themselves from any outward blessing, and so circumcision became of no profit, and has no place in Christianity.

Quite strongly in Galatians, Paul shows that circumcision for religious purposes is expressly prohibited, because sets aside the work of Christ; "*that if ye are circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing*" (Gal. 5:2). Even for a Jew, God never intended circumcision to be rested in without faith. In Romans 2, Paul addresses the issue of Jews who clung to circumcision as an irrevocable pledge of God's blessing on them regardless of obedience to the law, and *believed that it was impossible that God would judge them*. The Jews were mistakenly trusting in the rite of circumcision, which has to do with *temporal* blessing, and were imagining that it secured their *eternal* blessing. Paul shows that for a Jew, the outward sign of circumcision was not all God was looking for; "*For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, neither that circumcision which is outward in flesh; but he is a Jew who is so inwardly; and circumcision, of the heart, in spirit, not in letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God*" (Rom. 2:28-29).

Their bold and sinful argument was that they could disobey the *moral law*, but keep the *ceremonial law*, and they would still be blessed because God was locked in by the covenant with Abraham. Paul shows that this conclusion is false, that the Jew is under the judgment of God, and that the ceremony of circumcision makes him just that much more responsible. [Read more...](#)

**As an application**, Many professing Christians are likewise trusting in outward forms (baptism, church membership, confirmation, communion, etc.) which will never secure their eternal blessing.

### **Circumcision in Three Ways**

1. *Nationally*. The Jews as opposed to the Gentiles who are the uncircumcision (vv.26-27; Gal. 2:8-9).
2. *Medically*. A literal procedure to cut off physical flesh (v.28; Gen. 17:1).
3. *Spiritually*. A life of faith that is separated to God from the desires of "the flesh" (v.29; Phil. 3:3).

**25** For circumcision indeed profits if thou keep *the law*; but if thou be a law-transgressor, thy circumcision is become uncircumcision. **v.25** A Jew that kept the law (hypothetically) could profit from the ceremony of circumcision because the heart - which God looks upon - was right. But to have the outward form with the heart of "*a law-transgressor*" underneath voids the outward form.

**26** If therefore the uncircumcision keep the requirements of the law, shall not his

uncircumcision be reckoned for circumcision, **27** and uncircumcision by nature, fulfilling the law, judge thee, who, with letter and circumcision, *art* a law-transgressor? **vv.26-27** The great lesson here is that God looks for one who has an “*afflicted and contrite in spirit, and who trembleth at my word*” (Isa. 66:2). If a Gentile kept the requirements of the law (maintained a good conscience) having his heart right before God, he will receive the blessing of God without the outward form. He has “*circumcision of the heart*” (v.29). Furthermore, a Gentile who lives uprightly with a good conscience but without a religious form is a living witness to the guilt of a Jew who carries on with an outward form as a false-front for his sinful life.

**28** For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, neither that circumcision which is outward in flesh; **29** but he is a Jew who is so inwardly; and circumcision, of the heart, in spirit, not in letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God. **vv.28-29** The law cannot make a Jew answer inwardly to the meaning of circumcision. This passage is not saying that every Christian is a Jew (that is what Covenant Theologians teach). Remember, Paul is speaking to Jews. Rather, it is saying that *not every Jew is a true Jew*. A true Jew has an inward work of faith in his heart (Deut. 10:16). The Jews’ outward rite of circumcision was giving them false hope. Gentile believers (as well as Jewish believers) answer to the meaning of circumcision (Phil. 3:2-3), but only Jewish believers are “*true Jews*” (e.g. John. 1:47). For a similar thought, see Matt. 3:7-9, Rom. 9:7-8, and John 8:37-39, where the “*seed of Abraham*” are his natural descendants, but the “*children of Abraham*” are his spiritual descendants.

## Religious Argument (Theology) Cannot Shelter the Jew (3:1-8)

**vv.1-8** The Jewish mind objected to Paul’s teaching that they were under God’s judgment along with the Gentiles. This is why they continually persecuted him. Naturally, they would raise arguments to prove Paul wrong and to discredit his gospel. Paul knew what these objections were and the Spirit of God uses him to answer them. These questions are the Jew’s attempt to twist the gospel into being a truth that finds fault with God and charges Him with unrighteousness. Paul writes to show that the Gospel actually *reveals* His righteousness (Rom. 1:17). The Jew also objected to the Mystery because it states that Gentiles brought into the Church are equally blessed in Christ.

### CHAPTER 3

¶ What then is the superiority of the Jew? or what the profit of circumcision? **v.1 Objection #1:** *If the Gospel is true, then the Old Testament is false.* In other words, the Jew is asking; “By condemning the Jew aren’t you contradicting the bible by saying there is no profit to being one of the chosen people?”

**2** Much every way: and first, indeed, that to them were entrusted the oracles of God. **v.2 Answer:** Paul maintains that there are many advantages to being a Jew – the Old Testament blessings were not empty – but the greatest of all their privileges was having the written word of God. The Old Testament scriptures told them God’s moral standards, His ways with men, and foretold the coming of Christ.

**3** For what? if some have not believed, shall their unbelief make the faith of God of none effect? **v.3 Objection #2:** *If the Gospel is true, then it means God is unfaithful to His Old Testament promises.* Having the oracles of God, the Jews had failed to receive the true Messiah. In other words, the Jew is asking; “Because there has been failure on the part of the Jew in unbelief, does that mean that God’s faithfulness in His promises to the fathers is nullified?”

**4** Far be the thought: but let God be true, and every man false; according as it is written, “So that thou shouldest be justified in thy words, and shouldest overcome when thou art in judgment.” [Psa. 51:4] **v.4 Answer:** Paul replies “*far be the thought,*” or, “don’t even think it.” The phrase is found ten times in Romans. Whenever a difficult question comes up where it is a question if man is at fault or God, we need to be established in this point, and proceed on the basis that God is correct (true), and every man is wrong (false). Paul gives an example to show that God keeps His Word (Psa. 51:4). David sinned (committed adultery) and thought for a time that he could get away with it, but had to learn the hard way that God keeps His word. David’s sin only confirmed the truthfulness of God’s Word concerning His judgment of sin.

**5** But if our unrighteousness commend God’s righteousness, what shall we say? Is God unrighteous who inflicts wrath? I speak according to man. **v.5 Objection #3:** *If the Gospel is true, then God can’t judge me.* In other words, the Jew is asking; “If man’s sin commends (illuminates) God’s righteousness in judging sin, then our sins have helped God with His plan... and wouldn’t He be unrighteous to judge me for those sins?” Paul adds “*I speak according to man*” because He knows he is treading on very dangerous ground, and he assures us that this foolish and blasphemous argument does not originate with him, but from the mind of an unsaved man. Remember, God is glorified in His *judgment* of sin, but

not glorified *by* sin itself.

**6** Far be the thought: since how shall God judge the world? **v.6 Answer:** Again, Paul replies “don’t even think it.” Also, if you work that argument out to its logical conclusion you will come to this dilemma, how will God be able to judge the evil in the world? A day of Judgment is something every Jew believed in, and found in the Old Testament.

**7** For if the truth of God, in my lie, has more abounded to his glory, why yet am *\*I\** also judged as a sinner? **v.7 Objection #4:** *If the Gospel is true, then God wants me to sin.* This is a restatement of the third objection (although the 3rd touches God’s character, and the 4th touches more God’s ways in His grand scheme). The Jew feels that he has a toehold here. In other words, the Jew is asking; “If my lie (or any sin) results in more glory to God, how can He judge me as a sinner when I have helped bring Him glory by my sin?” He is really saying (a blasphemous idea) that sin helps God.

**8** and not, according as we are injuriously charged, and according as some affirm that we say, Let us practise evil things, that good ones may come? whose judgment is just. **v.8 Answer:** The logical conclusion to that argument is that we should do as much evil as possible because it is helping God get glory. Paul’s terse response is “*whose damnation is just*”. If you really believe that argument you are going to hell and you well deserve it; ouch! Paul interjects; “*as we are injuriously charged*”. The Jews were accusing Paul of teaching this very blasphemy by spreading the gospel of God’s grace, which “*covers all sin*”.

## Footnotes

1. Circumcision here [Genesis 17] accordingly is not introduced in a legal way, any more than the sabbath in Genesis 2. It is really the answer in man to the grace of God. - Kelly, W. Abram: *The Friend of God*.