

Introduction

Last week we turned, with Paul, to the Jewish nation. In verses 1 to 16 we learnt that God's judgement is based upon how our actions measure up with our knowledge of right and wrong. But still, the Jews had a unique identity. They had the law, and Jewish men were circumcised. These were signs of God's blessing. Out of all the nations of the world, God had made Israel his own.

So how could God show *no favouritism*, verse 11? How could there be *trouble and distress* for Jews, verse 9?

There is nothing wrong with having an identity. You may think yourself a Dragons supporter, or a mother. Nothing wrong with that. Nothing wrong with Jews calling themselves Jews. Except when that identity causes people to ignore the truth. Being a Dragons supporter does not mean they are the best team this year. Being a mother does not mean that your children are always going to be better at soccer. The Jews of Paul's day assumed that their identity as Jews meant that God would not judge them. And this was not true.

Paul explains in verse 17 to 29 that being a Jew is not about the external things, like having the law and being circumcised. Being a true Jew is about the heart. As Christians, we have an identity written on our hearts.

False Religion

Firstly let's understand these verses as they apply to the Jews of Paul's day. In verses 17 to 23, Paul speaks about the arrogant identity of some Jews, who had the law. Then in verses 25 to 27 he exposes the useless mark of circumcision.

Arrogant Identity 17-23

Some Jews of Paul's day had a arrogant identity. They took what should have been a good identity, and turned it into a presumption of superiority. In so doing they dishonoured God. The good identity they had is laid out in verses 17 and 18. ***'Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship with God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law'***.

Being a Jew is a good thing. After he brought them out of slavery in Egypt, God called them ***'my treasured possession ... a holy nation'*** (Exod 19:5-6). Not only were they special, they had the law: God's commandments on how to live. Furthermore, they knew how to relate to God through his word, prayer, festival and sacrifice. All of these advantages meant that they they knew what God wanted of all people. They knew what was important and what was not; they could ***approve of what is superior***. They had been instructed by God's word, the law, and they truly were wise and blessed.

But instead of being thankful, the Jews of Paul's day turned their good identity into arrogance. They presumed that they were superior. Let's read verse 19: ***'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'***. Because they knew God's will through his word, the law, some Jews saw themselves as the answer to the world's problems. Their knowledge puffed them up.

What they had was good, it was the answer to the world's problems. The law was '*the embodiment of knowledge and truth*'. But they did not follow up their knowledge with action. Paul had already said earlier in chapter 2 that '*it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.*' (2:13). No good having the law or even teaching the law if you don't obey it! So verses 21 and 22 say, '*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?*'

Jesus warned people about Jewish leaders, saying, '*do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.*' (Matt 23:3). It's hard to know why Paul chose theft, adultery and robbing temples in Romans 2:22. Perhaps there were well known cases of Jewish teachers being caught in hypocrisy in these ways. Maybe it was similar to the case of Jimmy Swaggart, a well-known preacher in the 1980s. He 'outed' a fellow-pastor by exposing him as an adulterer in 1987. Only a year later he himself was caught visiting a prostitute.

The result of such hypocrisy is dishonour to God. Verses 23 and 24 say, '*You who boast in the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law? As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."*' The Gentiles - that is, non-Jews - knew that the Jews didn't practise what they preached, and so they dishonoured God.

Likewise today, many Churches have come unstuck because of the hypocrisy of their teachers. People who teach about not loving money, and yet are greedy for more. Priests who preach about the humility of Jesus, and yet demand praise from their Church members. Preachers who talk about self-control and yet watch pornography. People don't practice what they preach, and in so doing dishonour God.

Useless mark

Moving on in the passage, we see that circumcision was a useless mark. You can read about circumcision in Genesis 17, where God commands Abraham to circumcise every male member of his family. It became the mark of a Jew, and still is to this day. The problem is, it was a useless mark, by itself. Verse 25, '*Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised.*'

It was good for Jews to know that they were God's chosen people, shown by the mark of circumcision. But this was useless if they broke the Jewish law. In fact, being a lawbreaker meant that you weren't really a Jew. Verse 28, '*A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical.*'

This is also how some Churches today go so wrong. The external things - rituals and traditions - are said to be useful by themselves. But rituals are only valuable when combined with faith. As Paul says in Galatians 5:6, '*The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*'

True Religion 29

In verse 29, Paul speaks about what it takes to be a true Jew. '*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.*'

What counts is what happens inwardly, in a person's heart. Way back before the Jews were even in the land of Israel, Moses had said to them, '***The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.***' (Deut 30:6). God has to do something in a person's heart so that they love him.

When Jesus came, he told people that they had to be born again by the Spirit. "***Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again ... the Spirit gives birth to spirit.***" (John 3:3, 6), Jesus taught that people needed the Spirit to give them new, spiritual life. When Paul writes '***circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit***', he is speaking of being born again.

This is what it means to be a true Jew. But what of we Gentiles, who are not Jews? The Bible teaches that '***through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus***' (Ephesians 3:6). Together with Jews, Gentiles like us need to be born again, to be marked in our hearts by him. And that is *all* it takes. You don't need to go through any special rituals, you don't need to eat certain foods or not eat other food. You don't need to observe special days and rituals. You just need to be born again.

God does that in our hearts when we repent of our sins and trust in Jesus. Trust that our sins have been paid for on the cross, and that our life is guaranteed by Jesus' resurrection. A new birth happens: our old identity is replaced with a new one, and our old, selfish, desires are replaced with new, godly ones.

A humble identity

Let's re-word verses 17 and 18 for those whose hearts have been circumcised. We can say, 'I am a Christian. I rely on Jesus' death and resurrection. I have a relationship with God through Him; he is my father. I know God's will, for he has given me his Word, the Bible. I know that love, joy, peace, patience and kindness are superior, and I try to live like Jesus, empowered by the Spirit.' This is our identity, brothers and sisters. It's not an external thing, though it does change how we live. It is an inward change in our hearts, wrought by the Holy Spirit.

It is not an arrogant identity, as if we have earned the right to be Christian. It is a humble identity, for we know it is only what Jesus has done that has given us new life.

Pleasing God

Because if this, our desire is to please God. Verse 29 says '***Such a person's praise is not from men, but from God.***' We don't live to impress people, we live to please God, who has done so much to give us eternal life.

Often we do things unseen by other people. The word Paul uses for 'inwardly' is the same word he has used in verse 16, for 'secret'. There he said that '***God will judge men's secrets***'. God sees what we have done in secret. But because we live to please God, it doesn't matter if anyone else sees. Jesus also used the word in Matthew 6. He speaks of giving, fasting and praying, and repeats the same phrase: '***your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you***'.

So when we give our time, talents or treasure to others in secret, we please God. And he will praise us when Jesus returns. You know how special it is when someone you respect and love gives you praise, don't you? Your parents, your spouse, a respected colleague ...

imagine receiving praise from God! And so you will, for you are a Christian who lives to please God.

Part of the way we please him is to speak of Jesus to others. We know that Jesus is the light of the world, verse 18. He is the only guide, the only instructor of the foolish, verse 20. Paul wrote that in Christ '***are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge***' (Col 3:20). He is, verse 20, '***the embodiment of knowledge and truth***'. And so we make disciples of all nations, baptising them and teaching them what Jesus taught us. Nick has spoken of his work in taking the gospel to high school students. This pleases God.

Christian, you are a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come. You have been marked inwardly by the Spirit, and so you live to please God. You give your time, talents and treasure and you go to the nations with the light of Christ. That is your identity in Christ.