CIRCUMCISION OF THE HEART

Romans 2:17–3:8

Key Verse: 2:29

“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.”

Who do you love? Some people are embarrassed to admit it. Some claim they love nobody. Some think they love a certain person when in fact they love someone else! It may seem like a silly question, but who we love is actually one of the most important things in life. As most people know, love can’t be forced or faked; love has to come from the heart. In today’s passage Paul actually touches on this. People tend to think religion is about knowing certain dogmas or performing certain rituals. But Paul tells us that real Christianity is about the heart, about who or what we love. Today we especially want to think about what circumcision of the heart means, and how we can experience it personally. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

In chapter 2 Paul has been addressing judgmental people generally. But in verses 12–16 he introduces a new element in his gospel presentation: it’s “the law.” In verses 12–16 he mentions “the law” ten times, and in the rest of chapter 2, another nine times. He’s going to discuss “the law” further in chapters 3,4,5,7 and 8. He’s not talking about human laws but about the Law of God in the Bible. Paul starts talking about “the law” in chapter 2 because he’s turned his attention to the Jews, and being a Jew himself he really gets their Jewish mentality. Jews compared themselves with Gentiles and judged them based on “the law.” Gentiles didn’t have “the law,” whereas Jews did. Paul adds in verse 13 that Jews thought they were righteous even if they only “heard” the law, meaning hearing the law read every Sabbath in the synagogue (Acts 15:21). God gave the Jews many ritual and dietary laws, but Paul especially seems to mean God’s moral laws. We can see it in verses 14,15, where he says Gentiles “by nature do what the law requires” and “that the work of the law is written on their hearts.” Paul’s point in verses 12–16 is that Jews, who have the law, will be judged by the law, and Gentiles, who do not have the law, will be judged by the moral law God gave them by nature and in their hearts.

But then Paul describes more deeply how Jews prided themselves on having the law. Read verses 17–20. The Jews relied on the law, were instructed from the law, and had “in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth.” What an incredible statement! In a sense Paul is agreeing with their idea that God’s law is such an amazing blessing. Through God’s law they could know God, find their identity, discover God’s will, and even guide and teach others. It was God’s great hope for them, not to be judges but to be Bible teachers for the lost world.

But there was a very serious problem. Read verses 21,22. Clearly, hearing, knowing and even teaching God’s law isn’t enough; we have to obey the law, and the Jews actually couldn’t. Maybe they could keep the law outwardly, but not from their hearts. Our Lord Jesus taught us that even getting angry or thinking lustful thoughts is tantamount to murder or adultery (Mt 5:22,28). And he lambasted all the pretentious religious hypocrisy among the Jews (Mt 23:2,3,13, 23,25,27,29). Paul knew firsthand that hypocrisy was a bigger problem among the Jews than they were willing to admit. Read verses 23,24. Paul considered hypocrisy not just a personal failure, but a means of poisoning vulnerable people against the whole notion of God and his word, making it all look like a fraud. Worst of all, Paul is saying that hypocrisy dishonors God. To Paul, hypocrites are worse than the people they judge. With these words he’s popping the bubble of Jewish self-confidence and self-righteousness.

Paul goes on to the other source of Jewish pride (besides having the law): it’s circumcision. Read verse 25. Jews highly valued circumcision as a sign of their being God’s people. But Paul says if they break the law, their circumcision “becomes uncircumcision,” meaning it cancels what circumcision was supposed to mean, making it useless. Circumcision has value only if one keeps the whole law (Gal 5:3). Read verses 26,27. For the third time in this chapter Paul compares Jews with Gentiles (9–11; 13–14; 26–27). And this time he’s saying uncircumcised Gentiles who keep God’s law are *better* than circumcised Jews who don’t.

Then he goes even deeper. Read verses 28,29. Paul is referring to an Old Testament teaching where God famously challenged his people, “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn” (Dt 10:16; cf. Jer 4:4; 9:25). Obviously circumcision isn’t just physical; it has a deeper spiritual meaning: to repent of having a stubborn heart towards God. The Bible explains it further: “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” (Dt 30:6). Two things stand out here. First, circumcision of the heart is something only God can do. Second, circumcision of the heart means actually starting to love God willingly and wholeheartedly. Circumcision of the heart looked forward to the new covenant God would make with his people, to change our hearts and help us know his forgiveness (Jer 31: 33,34). It pointed to the time when God promised to take away our heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh (Ez 11:19). When God circumcises our hearts by his Spirit, we no longer put confidence in our flesh (Phil 3:3). Ultimately, circumcision of the heart means being united with Jesus in his death and resurrection (Col 2:11,12).

We notice in verses 28,29 how Paul draws a contrast between what can be seen outwardly and what’s in the heart. God had told his people so many times that instead of outward appearances he’s way more interested in what’s in our hearts (e.g. 1 Sm 16:7; 1 Kgs 8:39; 1 Chr 28:9; 2 Chr 16:9; Ps 7:9; Prv 16:2; Jer 17:10). But the Jews ignored this truth. Like most people they liked to focus on appearances (Jn 7:24). They worked hard to get people to notice their acts of righteousness so that they could be honored by them (Mt 6:1–6). Their giving, their prayers, their fasting were all for a show; if nobody was looking, they most likely weren’t doing any of them. So Jesus said, “They do all their deeds to be seen by others” (Mt 23:5a). Living before people to gain their approval, honor and glory is a spiritual sickness; but it’s especially sick when we’re doing religious things to get people’s glory (Jn 5:44; 12:43). Seeking glory for oneself is a sign of an uncircumcised heart, of someone still in love with self instead of in love with God. It’s what we do naturally.

In contrast, in verse 29 the word “inwardly” in Greek is literally “in secret.” It describes a person who may not look like it, but who secretly is in love with God, who secretly is seeking God’s praise and glory, not his own. It’s someone who’s not interested in putting on a show for others, not worried about what people may think, but way more interested in what God is thinking. It’s a person who has started living a secret life in Christ before God (Col3:3).

So, simply speaking, circumcision of the heart means being changed. In English we have the idiom “a change of heart.” It refers to when a person changes his mind, who used to insist on one way but who starts thinking in the opposite way. Often it involves admitting fault. A change of heart can also mean changing what or who we love, or where we put our hope. Paul is saying here that God’s true people are those who’ve had this change of heart. Instead of insisting on our own way, now we really do want to go God’s way. Instead of claiming I’m always right, now I readily admit I’m wrong. Instead of loving myself or other people or the world, now I really do love God most. Instead of putting my hope in this world, now I put my hope in the kingdom of God.

Paul’s words to the Jews here in chapter 2 are not meant for us to just criticize them; they also apply to anyone who grew up in a Christian home and went to church all their lives. They may think they know the Bible more than others, that they’ve been baptized and keep the rules outwardly, so they certainly are Christians. But they may not have actually experienced circumcision of the heart. They may lack a personal relationship with God. Fundamentally, they still may be living for themselves. This is why Jesus told a man named Nicodemus, “You must be born again” (Jn 3:3,7; cf. 1:12,13). In Christian history many people have thought that knowing all the right doctrine is most important. But time and again God has reminded people that Christianity is really a religion of the heart, and this change of heart is something that can happen not by human effort but only by the Spirit of God. As we study Romans, we need to ask God to give us his Spirit to circumcise our hearts so that we can newly live before him, love him, and really seek to glorify him.

In 3:1,2 Paul again affirms that God blessed the Jews by entrusting them with “the oracles of God,” which refers to all God’s living words put together. But Paul is also aware of a problem. Look at verse 3. This is a rhetorical question. Indeed some Jews were unfaithful. They failed to believe God’s words, but in this case it especially seems to refer to how they rejected God’s gospel revealed in Jesus. It’s hard to understand. Paul will turn to this question in more detail in chapters 9–11. But here he answers it briefly. Read verse 4. Human failure and unrighteousness can never tarnish the truth of God and his words.

Then Paul anticipates a twisted way of thinking about God’s righteousness and wrath and our unrighteousness. Read verses 5,6. We may think we’re clever, but there’s no way we can argue our way out of the fact that we are unrighteous before God and deserving of his wrath. Paul goes on. Read verses 7,8. This twisted way of thinking about God’s grace is something Paul is going to come back to later (6:1,15). But here he shows how human beings will try any convoluted argument, any extreme rationalization, just to get out of being accountable to God.

Read verse 29 again. Today we mainly thought about what circumcision of the heart means, and why it’s so important. May God help us come to him honestly, just as we are, and ask his mercy to help us repent of relying on the wrong things, of living before people, of loving ourselves. May God grant us his Spirit and circumcise our hearts newly. May he grant us a new love for him and for others, a new heart and spirit to serve him and receive his praise only.