

Lesson 29 at StudyRomans.org

There are 15 questions about Romans 2:25-29 listed on the Handout for Lesson 29. Last week, we began looking at the first three questions, which apply to all five of the final verses in Romans 2. When class ended, we had answered the first question, and we were about halfway through answering the second question. So, let's continue with Question #2.

Question #2, Continued — What was the purpose of circumcision?

As we saw last week, circumcision was given as a sign of God's covenant with Abraham that continued down through the covenant line through Isaac and Jacob. And we also know from that promise to Abraham that circumcision came with advantages. Paul will describe those advantages in the next chapter.

But circumcision also came with an obligation. Paul describes that in another of his letters.

Galatians 5:3 — I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is **obligated** to keep the whole law.

Yes, circumcision had great advantages — but circumcision also had a huge obligation — an obligation to keep the whole law!

And that verse from Galatians 5 also explains another important fact about circumcision — it was part of **both** the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic covenant.

Leviticus 12:3 — And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.

John 7:22-23 — **Moses gave you circumcision** (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, **so that the law of Moses may not be broken**, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's whole body well?

And so circumcision was part of the law of Moses even though the law of Moses came 400 years after circumcision was given. In fact, circumcision was so important to the law of Moses that it trumped the Sabbath day, as Jesus just explained.

And that raises another question — what was the relation between circumcision and the Sabbath day? We have already seen one relation between the two — circumcision was one of the few things that could be done on the Sabbath. We also know that circumcision was a sign of the Abrahamic covenant and not the Mosaic covenant. Did the Mosaic covenant have its own sign? Yes, it did — and that sign was the Sabbath.

Exodus 31:16-17 — Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. **It is a sign forever** between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.

And so circumcision was both a sign of the covenant with Abraham and a command of the law of Moses. If, as a Jewish man, you refused to be circumcised, then you were a lawbreaker. That point will be helpful with one of our later questions about these verses.

Question #3 — How did most first-century Jews view circumcision?

As we have seen, circumcision came with both advantages and obligations, and so which part do we think the Jews were focused on? And if we were honest we might ask which part we would have focused on ourselves had we been in their place. Right! The advantage part! Forget the obligations — we just want the advantages!

Circumcision was given as a sign or a reminder, but the Jews often saw circumcision instead as a shield. Some rabbis taught that “no person who is circumcised will go down to Gehenna.” Just that physical mark alone would be enough to keep them safe.

If we were to look for a modern example of that same attitude, I think we could point to the use by many of the cross today. Very often, when we see people out in the world who are very clearly living a life directly opposed to the word of God, what else do we see? Don't we often see a cross hanging around their neck or tattooed on their body?

And I am not here today to say that we should never wear that symbol around our necks — but I do think we should ask ourselves why we are wearing it, if we do wear it. Do we wear it as a reminder of what that cross should mean in the life of every Christian? Do we wear it as a door opener so that people will ask us about it? Or do we wear it as a shield? If we wear a cross as a shield, then we are viewing the cross of Christ the same way that those rabbis viewed circumcision — that no one wearing a cross around their neck will ever go down to Hell.

As for the Jews, it is interesting to trace the history of that distorted view of physical circumcision. As we saw when we studied the prophecies of Daniel, the Jews were faced with an existential threat during the time between the testaments. That terrible threat eventually led to the Maccabean revolt and to the first independent Jewish

nation since before the Babylonian captivity. That Jewish nation lasted 79 years until the Romans under Pompey conquered Jerusalem in 63 BC, and once again the Jews were under foreign domination.

But prior to that Maccabean revolt, many Jews were rejecting Judaism in favor of Hellenism. The younger Jews, especially, were eager to adopt Greek culture and to integrate Greek practices into their Jewish society. Eventually there was a push to build a Greek gymnasium within sight of the temple where young men (including priests) would study Greek culture and take part in sports. The intertestamental book of First Maccabees describes it this way:

Whereupon they built a place of exercise at Jerusalem according to the custom of the heathen. **And made themselves uncircumcised**, and forsook the holy covenant, and joined themselves to the heathen.

Greek sports were conducted without clothing, which may have been why some of the Jews “made themselves uncircumcised,” meaning that they tried to reverse their circumcision with surgery.

The backlash to that extreme situation led directly to the extreme view of circumcision that we see here — that circumcision was a sign, not of the promise to Abraham, but rather a sign of safety from the wrath of God. No matter how they lived, they would be safe in the end if they were circumcised. All that mattered, they believed, was to have that physical mark on your body.

And, of course, we see Paul battling against that extreme view elsewhere in the New Testament.

Galatians 6:13 — For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.

But does that mean there is no value to circumcision? Not at all. In fact, Paul will refer to the value of circumcision in the next verse and also later in the first two verses of Romans 3. But, when it comes to being saved by Christ, circumcision does not count for anything.

Galatians 5:6 — For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

Galatians 6:15 — For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.

Romans 2:25

Romans 2:25 — For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.

We have three questions about this verse, and I think we should consider them all at the same time.

Question #4 — Paul says in verse 25 that circumcision can have “value” if you obey the law — what is that value?

Question #5 — What does it mean in verse 25 to obey the law?

Question #6 — What does Paul mean in verse 25 when he says “your circumcision becomes uncircumcision”?

When we first read verse 25, it looks like Paul is saying that circumcision does have value or, closer to the Greek, “is of profit.” But that view of verse 25 will be cast into some doubt when we get to Romans 3. Why? Because in Romans 3:1, Paul will say: “Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?” That verse makes sense only if Paul has cast doubt on the value of circumcision in the previous verses.

Is that what is happening here in verse 25? Is Paul casting doubt on the value of circumcision? Yes, I think he is. Let’s look again at what Paul says: “For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law.”

Yes, circumcision has value — circumcision is of profit — but there is a big “if” before that can occur — “if you obey the law.” If you do that, then, yes, circumcision has value.

But what if you don’t do that? What if you break the law? In that case, it is just as if you were never circumcised at all. “Your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.” What that means is that your circumcision then has no value and no profit. If you break the law, then you are in the same boat whether or not you were ever circumcised.

And doesn’t that make sense? After all, circumcision itself is a law in the law of Moses (Leviticus 12:3). If keeping that one law of circumcision meant that I could break all of the other laws, then why not just have that one law of circumcision? If it is okay for me to engage in theft and adultery if I am circumcised, then why not just replace the 10 commandments with that one commandment to be circumcised? That’s not the way the law works — not the way any law works. Keeping one law does not give me license to break all of the other laws.

Let's look again at what Paul told the Galatians.

Galatians 5:2-3 — Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is **obligated** to keep the whole law.

Those verses help us answer one of our questions about verse 25 — what is the value or profit that Paul has in mind here?

I think Paul answered that question in Galatians 5:3 — it is the profit that would come from keeping the whole law. It is the value of being saved from the wrath of God, not by something God has done, but by something you have done — you have kept the law perfectly. Christ would be of no advantage to you (as Paul says in Galatians 5:2), but that would be okay — you wouldn't need Christ because you would have kept the law perfectly. That would be the value or profit of circumcision.

And so, yes, there is a **potential** value in circumcision, but no one could ever realize that value. Only Jesus was able to keep the law perfectly. Every Jew being addressed by Paul in Romans 2 was a law-breaker, as Paul has already shown. So, yes, "circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law" — but no one obeys the law!

The issue here is not whether they are breaking God's law — they are. The issue here is whether possession of the law or whether the physical mark of circumcision will protect them from the wrath of God against those who have broken the law — and neither the law nor circumcision will do that.

If you break any law, then you might as well have also broken the law commanding you to be circumcised. You would be no better off and you would be no worse off. You would still just be a lawbreaker. That is Paul's point in verse 25. Your circumcision would have become un-circumcision.

Romans 2:26-27

Romans 2:26-27 — So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law.

Question #7 — Who is the physically uncircumcised man in verses 26 and 27?

Perhaps the first thing we should notice about verse 26 is that Paul is not speaking **to** an uncircumcised man, but rather Paul is speaking **about** an uncircumcised man. The second person “you” in these verses is still the circumcised man. The uncircumcised man is being referred to here by the third person “he.” Paul is still talking to the Jews.

So who then is this uncircumcised man in verses 26 and 27? The answer to that question depends on the answer to the next question, so let's consider Question #8 along with Question #7.

Question #8 — What is the law that is kept by that uncircumcised man in verses 26 and 27, and how is that law kept?

Is the law in verses 26 and 27 the law of Moses? I think it is, but we need to be very careful here.

Some commentaries say that this law is the law of Moses and that keeping the law means keeping the entirety of that law. Under that view, Paul is talking here about an uncircumcised man who kept the law of Moses perfectly.

I don't see how that view could possibly be right. Why not? Because circumcision itself was part of the law of Moses. Circumcision is commanded in Leviticus 12:3. How could any **uncircumcised** man ever be said to have kept the law of Moses perfectly? We know he broke at least one of its commandments just by being uncircumcised.

So what then is the answer? I think we can spot the answer by remembering what Paul has already told us and by looking at a very important word in verse 26 — the word “precepts.”

In verse 26, Paul introduces this uncircumcised man, not as someone who keeps the law, but as someone who keeps the precepts of the law. And while Paul does say this same man “keeps the law” in the next verse, I think Paul must be referring back to what he just told us about the same man — that he keeps the precepts of the law. Why? Because we know this uncircumcised man does not keep the law — he is uncircumcised.

And, as for that word “precepts,” Paul will later use that same word to describe the relation that a Christian has to the law of Moses.

Romans 8:3-4 — For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son

in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that **the righteous requirement of the law** might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

That is the same Greek phrase we find here in verse 26 — “the precepts of law” and “the righteous requirement of the law.” And I think it is the same thing we saw back in verse 14.

Romans 2:14 — 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.

I think Paul is still thinking of those Gentiles in verse 14 here in verses 26-27. Did this uncircumcised man have the law of Moses? No, he did not. But did that uncircumcised man have a law? Yes, he did. He had a law written on his heart (verse 15). And I think that law on his heart could be described as the precepts of the law of Moses — the righteous requirements of the law of Moses. Do not steal from other people, do not commit adultery, and so on. Things that mankind naturally knows to be wrong.

And so, when that uncircumcised man refused to commit theft and refused to commit adultery, what did that say about Jews who committed both of those sins, as Paul has already shown? What it says about them is precisely what Paul says about them right here.

Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law.

But what does that mean? How are the Jews condemned by that uncircumcised man who keeps the precepts of the law? Let's keep working through our list of questions.

Question #9 — What does Paul mean in verse 26 when he says that man's uncircumcision will be regarded as circumcision?

Let's start with what I think it does **not** mean. Some say that this uncircumcised man in verse 26 is a Gentile Christian. And why do they say that? Because of the end of verse 26: "Will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?" If the Jew loses his salvation in verse 25 when his "circumcision becomes uncircumcision," then (they argue) this Gentile must obtain salvation when his uncircumcision comes to be regarded as circumcision.

But I think that is all wrong. For starters, Paul's whole point here is that circumcision **cannot** be relied on for salvation. Instead, as we saw, circumcision was a sign of God's covenant with Abraham through the line of Jacob. Physical circumcision was physical evidence that you were in that covenant line — that physically you were a part of God's chosen people. Circumcision did not put you there, but instead circumcision was a sign that you were already there.

Also, when we take a step back, we see that Paul's entire focus here is not on showing that some are saved, but rather is on showing that everyone is a sinner. In fact, we will very soon see that very statement in Romans 3:23 — "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." That is where Paul is headed with this. Will Paul tell us how to be right with God? Yes, he will. Is that what Paul is doing here? I do not think so. And I think those who see that here are making the mistake of getting ahead of Paul's argument. Yes, we may see Paul

laying some subtle groundwork for what he will discuss later — but the focus of the argument here is to show that everyone is a sinner.

And so what can we say about an uncircumcised man for whom uncircumcision comes to be regarded as circumcision? What we can say is that, despite not being physically part of God's chosen people, this uncircumcised man lives as if he were part of God's chosen people.

And that view fits perfectly with the context. Why? Because Paul is talking here to the opposite of this Gentile who, while not physically part of God's chosen people, was living as if he were. Paul is talking to a Jew who physically **was** part of God's chosen people, but who was living as if he were **not**. That is the opposite of this Gentile.

This whole discussion reminds me of what Paul said to Peter in Galatians 2:14 — “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?” **If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile.** Isn't Paul saying the opposite here about this Gentile? **If you, though a Gentile, live like a Jew?**

And, as we will see, this view of verse 26 fits perfectly with the next verse: “Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law.” And that leads us to our next question.

Question #10 — In verse 27, how does that uncircumcised man condemn those Jews who break the law?

Remember the context here — circumcision. The Jews considered physical circumcision to be the best evidence that they were God's people and that they were completely secure. But Paul has now dismantled their misplaced reliance brick by brick.

And here we see the final brick — the uncircumcised man who keeps the law. This uncircumcised man lacks every advantage trumpeted by the Jews, and yet he keeps the law that he has been given better than the Jews keep the law of Moses they have been given. (And remember that the law the Gentiles had been given was the precepts of the law of Moses.)

Yes, the Jews have the written code (not just the precepts of the law, but the actual written law of Moses) and yes the Jews have circumcision, but they still stand condemned. Why? Because a Gentile who keeps the law is more a child of God than a Jew who breaks the law. The Jews were relying on the written law and on circumcision, but they were being outdone by someone who had neither of those things.

What we see here is the classic situation of someone with every conceivable advantage being completely outdone by someone with none of those advantages. And don't we see that same thing today all the time?

- Think of a student whose path to a top university came, not through hard work and sacrifice, but through family connections and financial contributions and who then spends each night partying with his similarly situated friends and then flunks out, and compare him with a student working his way through school while spending each night studying alone at the library so that he can graduate with honors.
- Think of an employee who was given his position in the family business, who started at the top and then spent his time cutting corners and doing as little work as possible, and compare him with someone having no such connections, who started at the

bottom doing the work others considered beneath them, but who rose to the top by having a work ethic of honesty and integrity.

- Think of a young person raised in the church by godly parents and who is baptized at a young age but who then walks away from God as soon as he leaves home, losing his salvation, and compare him with a young person raised outside the church by a family hostile to God, but who obeys the gospels and who is faithful to God throughout his life despite facing many difficulties and hardships.

What can we say about each of those examples? What we can say is precisely what Paul says here — the one with no advantages condemns the one with every advantage. And that is precisely what is happening here between this uncircumcised Gentile who keeps the law and this circumcised Jew who breaks the law.

So who then is this Gentile in verses 26-27? I think he is one of the same Gentiles we met back in verse 14. Someone who does not have the law of Moses, but who nevertheless by nature does what the law requires. Someone who does not have circumcision (that physical sign of being in God's covenant line), but who is nevertheless regarded as circumcised. And Paul is saying that Gentile condemns those who have the law of Moses and who have the physical sign of circumcision, but who live as if they have neither.

But really, Paul? Can you really mean what you are saying here? Can you, who are a Hebrew of the Hebrews, really be saying this about circumcision — that circumcised Jews can become uncircumcised, and that uncircumcised Gentiles can be regarded as circumcised? Paul,

do you need a biology lesson? Paul answers that objection in the final two verses of Romans 2.

Romans 2:28-29

Romans 2:28-29 — For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. 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.

Question #11 — How does Paul define a Jew in verses 28-29?

Paul's argument in these two verses revolves around two words: inward and outward. For no one is a Jew who is merely one **outwardly**, but a Jew is one **inwardly**. That is the contrast here — the contrast between inward and outward. But we have a big question to consider about that contrast, and it is a question that will help us answer our other questions about these verses.

Paul is clearly saying here that being a Jew requires something on the inside — but how does that something on the inside relate to what is on the outside? Does Paul intend that inward something to **replace** what is outward? Or does Paul intend that inward something to be **in addition** to what is outward? In short, does a Jew just need this inward quality, or does a Jew need both the inward and the outward?

And so, what is the answer to that question? Didn't we just read it? Look at verse 28 again: "For no one is a Jew who is **merely** one outwardly." Doesn't that word "merely" tell us that to be a Jew you must **at least** have the outward sign of circumcision. That outward quality may not be all you would need to be a Jew (as we will soon be told),

but you at least need that. Isn't that what the word "merely" means in verse 28? No one is a Jew who is **merely** one outwardly?

That sounds like a pretty good argument, but it is not. Why not? Because that all-important word "merely" in our argument is not in the Greek text. The ESV just added that word "merely" by way of explanation. The actual Greek text is portrayed much better by the KJV and the ASV versions.

Romans 2:28 (KJV) — **For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh.**

Romans 2:28 (ASV) — **For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh.**

Neither of those translations includes the word "merely." And perhaps we should pause for a quick lesson here about serious Bible study — you should never use just one English translation. Using the ESV is fine, but you should also have at least the KJV or the ASV on your desk at the same time. And this verse is a perfect example to show us why that is so important.

So we should not rely on any argument based on the word "merely" in verse 28 for the simple reason that the word "merely" is not found in verse 28, at least not in the original Greek.