

Lesson 30 at StudyRomans.org

Question #11, Continued — How does Paul define a Jew in verses 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.

In these two verses, Paul is talking to Jews, and Paul is telling them who is a Jew and who is not a Jew. As for who is a Jew, Paul is saying that an outward quality is not sufficient but that some inward quality is required. When we ended last week, our question was whether that inward quality was **instead of** the outward quality or was **in addition to** the outward quality.

At first, we thought verse 28 answered that question with the word “merely” — a Jew is not **merely** one outwardly, but is **also** one inwardly. But, as we saw, that word “merely” from the ESV is not in the Greek. The Greek text just says “he is not a Jew who is one outwardly” as we read in the ASV and KJV, and so we can’t base any arguments on the word “merely” in the ESV.

I think the ESV was wrong to add the word “merely” in its attempt to better explain the text, but is the ESV correct in its explanation? I think it is. I think we can say that the true Jew being described by Paul in these verses had **both** the outward quality and the inward quality. I think we can say that this inward quality did not replace the outward quality, but rather that the inward quality was in addition to the outward quality.

Why? Because, for a Jewish man, circumcision was always at least outward — the only question was whether the circumcision was also inward. Yes, a Gentile who kept the moral precepts of the law of Moses might be regarded as circumcised as Paul describes, but what was true of that Gentile could never be true of a Jew. The law of Moses commanded circumcision, and so, for a Jew, there could be no circumcision that did not at least include an outward physical circumcision.

If a Jew rejected that command from God to be physically circumcised, then the only inward quality that Jew would have in his heart would be the inward quality of disobedience. That alone is enough to let us know that Paul is describing a Jew who had something **in addition** to physical circumcision rather than something **instead** of physical circumcision.

But that is not the only evidence we have. We also have the Old Testament, and we should note that Paul is not presenting this definition of a Jew as something new. In fact, we find this same definition in the Old Testament, and when we look there what we find again is that physical circumcision is assumed. The issue there was not whether the Jews had been physically circumcised, but rather the issue was whether the Jews had **only** been physically circumcised.

Leviticus 26:41-42 — If then their **uncircumcised heart** is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity, then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land.

Jeremiah 4:4 — Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; **remove the foreskin of your hearts**, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds.

Ezekiel 44:7-9 — In admitting foreigners, uncircumcised **in heart and flesh**, to be in my sanctuary, profaning my temple, when you offer to me my food, the fat and the blood. You have broken my covenant, in addition to all your abominations. ... Thus says the Lord GOD: No foreigner, uncircumcised **in heart and flesh**, of all the foreigners who are among the people of Israel, shall enter my sanctuary.

And we see that same thing elsewhere in the New Testament as well — not the issue of whether the Jews were physically uncircumcised, but whether they were **only** physically circumcised.

Acts 7:51 — You stiff-necked people, **uncircumcised in heart and ears**, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.

In each case, physical circumcision for a Jewish man was assumed — there was no question that they at least had that outward quality. The question was always what else they had. Did they also have circumcised hearts? Paul's point here is that, while physical circumcision is required to be a Jew, physical circumcision is not all that is required to be a Jew. Physical circumcision is necessary to be a Jew, but physical circumcision is not sufficient to be a Jew.

What else is required? Verse 29 answers that question: “But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.”

Whether or not you are a Jew also depends on something inward — something about your heart. The outward quality is something visible on the flesh, but the inward quality is something visible only on the heart — it is something only God can see. And Paul uses some very subtle wordplay at the end of verse 29 to make that point: “His praise is not from man but from God.”

And, yes, the wordplay in that phrase is subtle. In fact, it is so subtle that it can be seen in neither the English translation nor even in the original Greek! To see the wordplay in that phrase, we need to look at the Hebrew name “Judah” from which we get the word “Jew.” That Hebrew name, Judah, comes from a Hebrew word meaning “praise.” In fact, the Bible itself explicitly describes that connection between Judah and praise.

Genesis 29:35 — And she (Leah) conceived again and bore a son, and said, “This time I will **praise** the LORD.” **Therefore** she called his name **Judah**.

Paul is reminding his Jewish readers here about that same connection, and he is effectively saying to them, “You Jews are a people named for praise - but whose praise? Are you seeking the praise of man or the praise of God?” In short, do you have only the outward quality that man can see, or do you also have the inward quality that only God can see?

And, again, this was not new. This distinction between the outward appearance of the flesh and the inner appearance of the heart was the same distinction that God made to Samuel.

1 Samuel 16:7 — For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.

And so, if our question is whether being a Jew depends only on something that is outward and visible to man, or instead also depends on something inward that is visible only to God, then we now have the answer to that question. Both the outward and the inward qualities are required.

Let's consider the next two questions together:

Question #12 — What does Paul mean in verse 29 when he says “by the Spirit”?

Question #13 — What does Paul mean in verse 29 when he says “not by the letter”?

Let's start by looking at what Paul does **not** mean. When Paul contrasts the letter and the Spirit, Paul is not lessening the importance of the written word of God. How do we know that? At least two reasons — because we know what God had said on that subject and because we know Paul.

- In the very next chapter, Paul will tell us that God's word remains true even if every person on earth disagrees with it (Romans 3:4).
- And Paul elsewhere describes the word of the cross as the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18).
- And Paul describes the word of God as the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17).

- And elsewhere Paul condemns anyone who “teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Timothy 6:3).
- And Paul knew that the inspired words he was speaking and writing were the words of God (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

And so, if anyone were to use this verse or any other verse to suggest that Paul was somehow lessening the importance of the written word, we know that person would be very badly mistaken.

And why do I bring this up? I bring it up because there are such people out there! In fact, some of them bear the name of brother. They have a view that diverges from the word of God, and when you point that out to them, what do they say? “You are being led by the letter, but I am being led by the Spirit! And we all know that the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life!”

And, yes, the counterargument is obvious: that, when they quote such verses about letters, they are using letters to dismiss the importance of letters. For another response, please read the excellent article on the Handout for Lesson 30.

And those responses are pretty strong, but I think an even stronger response is to look at what Paul is really saying here. We know that Paul is not belittling the importance of the word of God, but what is he doing? What is Paul’s point here?

To answer that question, we need to answer our two current questions — what does Paul mean by Spirit, and what does Paul mean by

letter? Let's start by looking at the four contrasts that we see in verse 28-29.

- We see the contrast of Outward versus Inward.
- We see the contrast of Physical versus Heart.
- We see the contrast of Letter versus Spirit.
- We see the contrast of Man versus God.

Three of those four contrasts very clearly focus on the distinction between the outward appearance and the inward appearance.

- Circumcision should create a change both in the **outward** appearance and in the **inward** appearance.
- Circumcision should create a change both in the **physical** appearance and the appearance of the **heart**.
- Circumcision should create a change both in how **man** sees you and in how **God** sees you.

Those three contrasts are easy to understand and each of them fits perfectly within the context of circumcision. True circumcision involved a change on both the outside and the inside. That is what is meant here by outward versus inward, by physical versus heart, and by how man sees you versus how God sees you.

But there are four contrasts in these two verses, and so far we have explained only three of them. What about that fourth contrast of letter versus spirit?

We could look at many different theories about what “spirit” means in verse 29, but I think we can focus on three possibilities.

- The first possibility is that the “spirit” in verse 29 is the Holy Spirit. (Based on the capital letter “S” in “Spirit,” we know that the ESV translators favored this possibility.)
- The second possibility is that the “spirit” in verse 29 is the spirit of the person.
- The third possibility is that the “spirit” in verse 29 is the spirit of the law.

Can we rule out any of these three options based just on the context? I don’t think so. Some of these options are better supported by the immediate context, but we can find contextual support in Romans for all of them.

Option #1: The “spirit” in verse 29 is the Holy Spirit

As for the spirit in verse 29 being the Holy Spirit, verse 29 would be either the first or the second mention of the Holy Spirit in Romans depending on our view of the “Spirit of holiness” in Romans 1:4. (We looked at two possibilities for that verse.)

But whether verse 29 is the first or the second mention, it would be just one of many references to the Holy Spirit in Romans. In fact, if we look at the Handout for Lesson 25 of Joel, we see that Paul refers to the Holy Spirit more often in Romans than in any of his other letters. And we also see that there are more references to the Holy Spirit in Romans than in an other New Testament book except for Acts and

Revelation. And so there is plenty of contextual support for finding the Holy Spirit in verse 29.

The strongest evidence for this view is what we will read about the Holy Spirit in the remainder of this letter to the Romans. In particular, Paul will soon tell us that “we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code” (Romans 7:6). And that view also means that the “letter” in this verse is the old written code — the law of Moses.

And perhaps even stronger evidence is Paul’s use of this same contrast between letter and spirit elsewhere. For example, in 2 Corinthians 3:6, Paul writes “for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life,” which, I think, is certainly a reference to the Holy Spirit.

The strongest evidence **against** this view is the immediate context. As we have seen, Paul’s point here is to show that we are all sinners. Yes, Paul will very soon describe the solution to that problem, but here Paul is still describing the problem — we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. If Paul is discussing the Holy Spirit in verse 29, then I think he is doing so only to lay some early groundwork for what he will explain in much more detail later.

Option #2: The “spirit” in verse 29 is the spirit of the person

As for the spirit in verse 29 being the spirit of the person, that view finds support in the immediate context.

In fact, under this view, this fourth contrast of spirit versus letter would be like the other three contrasts in these verses — it would be describing the change created by circumcision — both a surface

change (like with the letters on the surface of a page) and an inner change (like in the spirit of a person).

The strongest evidence for this view is that it fits best with the immediate context.

Each of the other three contrasts in these two verses is focused on the person. Each of the other three contrasts in these two verses describes something about the inward or outward change in that person created by circumcision. Under this view, the same is true of this fourth contrast.

The strongest evidence **against** this view is how Paul uses letter and spirit in 2 Corinthians 3:6 and written code and spirit in Romans 7:6. Could Paul be using the same terms here in a different way than he uses those same two terms elsewhere? He could. Is he? Maybe not. Also, I suspect we can all agree that the use of “letter” as an analogy to describe the surface appearance of the person is a bit strained.

Option #3: The “spirit” in verse 29 is the spirit of the law

As for the spirit in verse 29 being the spirit of the law, this view would be similar to the second option — except that the change created by circumcision would be described both as a surface change (like the change created by following the letter of the law) and an inner change (like the change created by also following the spirit of the law).

The strongest evidence for this view is the larger context of verse 29. Several times we have noted a similarity between the person Paul is describing and the Pharisees with whom Paul was very familiar, having been one himself.

And what did Jesus say about the Pharisees?

Matthew 23:23 — Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.

I think what that verse is telling us is that the Pharisees had focused on the letter of the law to the neglect of the spirit of the law.

When you focus on the letter of the law, you look for loopholes. Those loopholes go away when you also focus on the spirit of the law — not just on the least I can do to satisfy the letter of the law, but rather also on what that law tells me about how God wants me to live.

And we have already seen this same point earlier in this letter — the letter of the law says do not commit adultery, but, when we also consider the spirit of the law, we know that it is also wrong to lust for adultery in our heart even if we do not commit the physical act. We saw earlier that may have been why Paul could accuse the Jews in Romans 2 of committing the same acts of idolatry and homosexuality that he described in Romans 1.

I think what Jesus is telling us in Matthew 23 is that we should obey both the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. Not one instead of the other, but both. “These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.” If the ESV had chosen this option, they might have added another instance of the word “merely” — by the Spirit, not **merely** by the letter.

The strongest evidence **against** this view is the same as the strongest evidence against it being the spirit of the person, but there is another piece of evidence against this third option.

With the spirit of the person, we could at least say that Paul had used “spirit” that same way elsewhere — he referred to “my spirit” in Romans 1:9. But we can’t say that with the spirit of the law. If that is how Paul is using the word “spirit” here, I think we can say it is the only verse where Paul does so. Again, is it possible? Yes, it is. Is it likely? Maybe not.

So which is the best answer? Is the “spirit” in verse 29, the Holy Spirit, the spirit of the person, or the spirit of the law?

I don’t think we can completely rule out any of those options. I think any of them could possibly be correct — they each have some evidence in their favor and some evidence against them. And perhaps that ambiguity was intentional — perhaps God wanted us to see several equally correct meanings of “spirit” here so that we could learn a lesson from each of those views.

But if I had to choose just one, I would lean toward the “spirit” in verse 29 being the Holy Spirit. I think the evidence is strongest in favor of that view and strongest against the other two views.

But why would Paul briefly mention the “Spirit” here in this context about the problem of sin? Two reasons — first, as we said, perhaps he did so to give us a brief glimpse of the solution to that problem that he will soon describe in great detail, and second, perhaps as a reminder of the role that the Holy Spirit played under the old covenant. Remember what Stephen said in Acts 7:51 — “You stiff-necked people,

uncircumcised in heart and ears, **you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did**, so do you.” The Jews had been resisting the Holy Spirit for a very long time!

Question #14 — Does Paul’s definition of “Jew” include the uncircumcised man in verse 26 who keeps the law?

I think the answer must be no. As we have said, Paul’s definition does not require just an inward quality but instead requires both an inward and an outward quality. I do not see how anyone who is physically uncircumcised could ever qualify as a Jew under this definition.

These Jews had been relying on physical circumcision as evidence of their Jewishness, and Paul is telling them that more than that is required — they also need circumcised hearts. And, as we saw, that is the same message to them that we find in the Old Testament.

And so, I do not think that Paul’s definition of “Jew” in these verses includes the uncircumcised man in verse 26 who keeps the law. Paul is not enlarging the meaning of Jew here, but rather Paul is narrowing it.

Question #15 — Is Paul saying here that it is Christians (both Jew and Gentile) who are the true Jews?

There are certainly those in the church who teach that verses 28-29 are describing the church. In their view, those in the church (both Jew and Gentile) are the true Jews, and they say that Paul is telling us that right here — that being a true Jew is defined by something inside the person rather than by something outside the person.

And how do I know for sure that some people in the church teach that? I know it for sure because I have taught it myself! And I have heard it taught by others. But I have now changed my mind about that view of these verses. Why?

First, Paul has been talking to the Jews since the beginning of Romans 2, and I think Paul is still talking to the Jews here at the end of Romans 2. And, as we have seen, I think that Paul is not saying here that Jewishness is defined only by an inward quality. Instead, I think Paul is saying that Jewishness is defined by both an inward quality and an outward quality.

And second, finding the church in verses 28-29 would require us to completely ignore the context of these verses and the argument that Paul is making in this chapter. Yes, Paul will later describe life in the spirit, but what Paul is describing here is death in sin — something that was equally true of both Jew and Gentile as lawbreakers.

But, with all of that said, is there a sense in which Christians (both Jew and Gentile) are the true Jews? I think there is, but I think we need to look elsewhere to find it.

The city of Jerusalem was the dwelling place of God's people — the Jews — in the Old Testament. And the church? The church is the New Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God's people (Jew and Gentile) in the New Testament.

- **Galatians 4:26** — But **the Jerusalem above** is free, and she is our mother.

- **Hebrews 12:22** — But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, **the heavenly Jerusalem**, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering.
- **Revelation 3:12** — The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, **the new Jerusalem**, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.
- **Revelation 21:10** — And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me **the holy city Jerusalem** coming down out of heaven from God.

And, as for the sign of circumcision given to Abraham, Christians are the offspring of Abraham and heirs according to the promise.

- **Galatians 3:29** — And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

And, as for Israel, Paul describes the church as the Israel of God.

- **Galatians 6:15-16** — For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon **the Israel of God**.

And we should note that, in a book that is all about the church, the Apostle John also tells us about Jews who are not really Jews.

Revelation 2:9 — I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Revelation 3:9 — Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie — behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you.

And so, yes, there is a sense in which the church, as the people of God in the New Testament, stepped into the shoes of Israel, the people of God in the Old Testament. But we need to be careful not to see that comparison under every rock. Yes, it is there, but no, I don't think it is here in Romans 2.

And I do not think that Paul's argument here or anywhere else is that we should just think of Christians as Jews. Yes, there is some similarity between the people of God under the old and new covenants, but the primary fact about Jews and Gentiles under the new covenant is that "there is neither Jew nor Greek ... for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Paul's primary point is not that we are all Jews, but rather that it doesn't matter whether we are Jews. What matters is whether we are one in Christ Jesus — and that happens through the power of the gospel of Christ (to the Jew first and also to the Greek).

And, of course, we will have much more to say on these topics when we get to Romans 9-11, where Paul will also have much more to say on these topics.

Chapter 3

We are going to split Romans 3 into two sections: verses 1-20 and verses 21-31. And, as we will see, the first section in verses 1-20 has one main point, but that one main point will be interrupted by a brief diversion in verses 3-8. (We can see that verses 3-8 are a parenthetical by looking at the continuity of thought from verse 2 to verse 9.)

The main point in verses 1-20 is to present a Biblical indictment of the Jews, which is the logical conclusion to this section of Paul's letter, which began with Romans 2:1. And the brief diversion from that main point occurs in verses 3-8, in which Paul acknowledges possible objections to his message.

And here are the objections that Paul will briefly consider in verses 3-8:

- If the Jews were really given an advantage, then why have most of the Jews failed to receive the promised blessings?
- If the death of Christ was the will of God, then how can the Jews be blamed for carrying out the will of God?
- If the death of Christ was the channel through which blessings would flow to both Jew and Gentile, then why is it that so many Jews have not been blessed even though the cross has been accomplished?

And so, with that introduction, let's start with verse 1.

Romans 3:1

Romans 3:1 — Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?

As we said when we looked at Romans 2:25, this verse makes sense only if Paul had somehow discounted the value of circumcision prior to this verse — and we know that he did. Back in verse 25 of the previous chapter, Paul said that yes, circumcision had value, but that value came only if you perfectly obeyed the law, which no one but Jesus was able to do.

And so some Jews might have wondered whether there was any value at all to circumcision — which is why Paul asks these two rhetorical questions in verse 1 — “Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?”