



“Cut to the Heart”¹ **Romans 2:25-29**

In the book series *The Chronicles of Narnia*, there’s a boy character named Eustace. He’s a naughty, self-centered child. Yet, in one scene, he finds himself in the midst of a fortune. With all this treasure, he imagines what life could be like. He puts on a gold bracelet, and he falls asleep with his treasure. When he wakes up, his arm hurts terribly. His inward heart of greed and selfishness has manifested itself, and he has become a dragon. He’s no longer human. His sin has taken over. He’s in physical and inner turmoil.

Can Eustace be rescued? Will he ever become human again? Will he ever be free from the bondage that constrains his leg? In grace, Aslan comes to Eustace. (In case you don’t know who Aslan is, he is a Lion and he’s the Creator of Narnia.) Aslan takes him to the center of a garden on a mountaintop. At the center is a well. The water in that well would relieve Eustace’s pain. Then Aslan says that Eustace would have to undress to get into the well. Eustace is confused. He remembers he is a dragon. How can he get the dragon skin off? His solution is to start to tear off his scales. He removes one layer only to find another horrible layer of scales. He removes another and then another. Finally, he realizes that no matter how hard he tries, he will never rid himself of this.

Aslan then says to Eustace that he needs to let Aslan undress him of the dragon. While the thought of Aslan tearing his scales could be fearful and painful, Eustace was so desiring freedom that he laid on his back. Then Eustace describes what he felt when Aslan tore into his scales:

The very first tear [Aslan] made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. . . .

Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off — just as I thought I’d done it myself the other three times, only they hadn’t hurt — and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobby-looking than the others had been. And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then [Aslan] caught hold of me — I didn’t like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I’d no skin on — and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I’d turned into a boy again. . . .

¹ This manuscript is still in the rough draft phase. I recommend you utilize these notes in conjunction to the sermon to gain greater insight and clarity.

After a bit the lion took me out and dressed me . . . in new clothes.

This is C.S. Lewis' creative way of describing what it is like for someone to be bound in sin and then find Jesus as their Rescuer. And, what you notice in this story is that there was pain before there was cleansing. I tell this story because I want to again emphasize how Paul is writing in the book of Romans. We need to think of Romans 1, 2 and the beginning of 3 like Aslan's claws penetrating deeply. We need to see it this way because I firmly believe that too many people miss the beauty and magnificence of what's going on in these chapters simply because they're so strong in warning.

But what we learn in Scripture is that if someone does not know that they are completely and utterly lost, they will not turn to the Savior. Instead, they will continue to try to peel the layers of sin off with their own claws. That will *never* work. So, in Romans 1 and 2, Paul drives this point home. Verse after verse, passage after passage; Paul is relentless in showing how both Jews and Gentiles are under the wrath of God if they don't entrust themselves to Jesus. In emphasizing this, Paul is open and honest about the reality of Hell. He warns against self-righteous behavior and licentious behavior and reveals that either can be means of self-justification. No one, left to themselves, should walk away from these verses saying, "Mmm, I feel so good about myself!" NO! Instead, these verses should cause people to lay on their backs and say, "I can't purify myself. Jesus, I need you!"

Yet, our wills are strong. We still try to self-justify. Paul knows that. As long as we self-justify, we will not turn to Jesus, nor will we embrace the freedom of what Jesus gives! And, we should want Jesus and what he offers. So, Paul continues Romans 2. And the verses we have here are like Aslan's claws reaching deeper. What we see in these verses is that **Circumcision, and religious rites, will not rescue anyone from God's wrath.**

As we study the text this morning, for those of you who are believers in Jesus, I pray these words encourage and strengthen you today, being reminded that your salvation from first to last is from Jesus. And, for those of you who are religious moralists – and you don't really want God for God – I pray that you would lay on your back (so to speak), and let God's Spirit insert his claws and cleanse you!

With this in mind, turn in your Bibles to Romans 2, and we will read verses 25-29 this morning:

²⁵ For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. ²⁶ So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? ²⁷ Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. ²⁸ For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. 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. ²

Circumcision, and religious rites, will not rescue anyone from God's wrath. As we read this text, there are probably a slew of questions that could come to your mind. And, I'm going to be straightforward

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 2:25–29.

with you this morning: I will not be answering all your questions. Not because I'm lazy, but because Paul's writing style should free us to focus on what he's saying in the moment within a given text. Paul is a very gifted teacher and writer. He is technical and complex. Paul will bring up things in chapter 1 that he's going to talk about in chapter 3. He'll mention things in chapter 2 that will come up in chapters 3, 4, 5, 8, 9 10 (for example). His writing style reminds me of the story of Hansel and Gretel. Throughout the book of Romans, he's throwing out breadcrumbs to lead us to a final destination. Or, to put it another way, he's connecting dots throughout the whole book. In Romans, he's not leaving a subject behind. He's weaving it all together. So, keep that in mind as we study the text this morning. I'm going to try to emphasize *these* verses. And, where I might have to go outside of these verses, I'll do that; but I want to ensure we're getting the point he's making here. Now, with that said, let's see *why* circumcision, and religious rites, will not rescue anyone from God's wrath.

Why?

1. True obedience matters (vv. 25-26).

Read verses 25-26 with me again: ²⁵ For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. ²⁶ So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?³

Each week, I have sought to remind all of us that while Paul is speaking to the Jewish people in particular, the applications spread to religious moralists in general. The same is true even in this text – even though Paul is highlighting circumcision. So, while I'll be highlighting Paul's main point with the Jews, I'm also going to be making general applications to people in our day as well who may not be Jews, but who may fall into the same traps they were falling into.

Now, verse 25 starts off saying, "For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law. . . ." This is really an interesting statement because it seems to come out of nowhere. The previous passages don't talk about circumcision at all. In last week's sermon, we learned that the big idea of that passage was that a religious moralist is a hypocrite because they deny God with the kindnesses he gives to them. In verses 23-24, Paul says that the Jews break God's law and that God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of them.

And then Paul says, "For circumcision." Where is this coming from? Well, again, keep in mind Paul's writing style. It is not only putting together dots, but Paul incorporates all kinds of linguistic styles. And so, when Paul says "For circumcision," he's admitting that he's projecting what the Jewish person is thinking. In the previous passage, Paul has taken God's requirements and, like a claw, has shown the religious moralistic Jew that they don't really want God for God – and the religious, moralistic Jew says to himself, "Yeah, but I'm circumcised!"

Just for the sake of clarity, I need to explain briefly what circumcision is. It's a sign of a covenant God made with Abraham and his offspring. All men were to be circumcised to show that God promised to bless the world through Abraham's offspring. Anyone who wasn't circumcised and refused circumcision has confessed they were breaking the covenant with God. Now, some of you could say "why circumcision?" I think in one sense, it reveals that God's blessing is to the offspring. It's a clear, visible reminder of that. But there's more. Oftentimes in the ancient world, a sign would signify the curse that

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 2:25–26.

came along with breaking the covenant. So, to be circumcised was to be cut off. If the people broke covenant with God, they were cut off from the most intimate and personal of relationships. Cut off from God and his people.

But keep this in mind. Circumcision doesn't change the reality of God's promise. Through Abraham, all the nations of the world would be blessed! Whether or not someone is circumcised didn't change the promise of God. But, by Paul's time period, people viewed circumcision as guaranteeing salvation. One Jewish writing states that "no person who is circumcised will go down to Gehenna" (see footnote 1, Moo, p. 167). Other writers around the 1st century also stated those things with such emphasis. So, it's not hard to imagine why Paul then starts verse 25 with circumcision. The Jew can have all things leveled against him, but he can simply say, "But I'm circumcised. I *can't* be lost."

To that, Paul says, "circumcision is indeed of value if you obey the law." Right here, I have a question for you to ponder. What value is Paul talking about? Many people here say that Paul is saying "circumcision is of value for salvation if you obey the law." And so commentators will say, "If people kept the law perfectly, then circumcision would save them because they'd be perfect." But I have a real problem with that. Would God allow someone into eternal life who did all the externally right things but didn't love God? No, because they didn't keep the intention of the Law. Jesus said the summation of the Law first and foremost points to loving God! Well, if you don't love God, you don't *get God*. And this is what Paul has been saying and what we even studied last week. The people said they honored God, but they actually dishonored and blasphemed God. In addition, when Paul talks about himself before coming to faith in Jesus, he said that as a practicing Jew, he was blameless. If you had looked at his life, no accusation against him would stick. He was *that good*. If someone went to Paul before he trusted Jesus and said, "Circumcision would be of value if you keep the law externally," Paul would say, "Good. I've done it!"

So, what is Paul saying here? What value is circumcision? Well, in chapter 3, Paul answers the value of circumcision and the Law. And, it's something we've already discovered. The Law and circumcision is to show God's glory, remind us of our sinfulness and to reveal our need for the Lord. So, when Paul says that circumcision is of value, he says that it has a value in teaching us specific things about God and us. But that value is only seen if we obey the Law.

Right here, people will then say, "obey the law" means "keeping the law perfectly." I will grant that sometimes "keeping the law" does refer to a perfect keeping of the law. But context is very important in deciphering that. I'm going to propose to you that I believe these phrases don't mean "perfectly keep the law," but instead this means, "keeps the intent of the Law." The phrases refer to a changed heart that leads to obedience. It doesn't refer to someone perfectly obeying external rules because even in a couple verses, Paul emphasizes an inner change. And, if Paul is saying someone who perfectly obeys externally would be saved, then this would go completely against the argument that he's been making – that we need God. Salvation is being reconciled to him, not simply obeying commands. It's not about climbing the rung of spiritual success! So, let's look at context to see that obey the law means to obey its intent.

All the way back in Romans 1, Paul says that his job is to bring about the obedience of faith. And that phrase means that God counts faith as obedience and that the fruit of faith is obedience. I believe that the obedience of faith is always the intention of God. Elsewhere in Scripture, we read that without faith it is impossible to please God. The writer of Hebrews then comments on how the Old Testament saints had *faith*. They were *not* saved by their works, but they were saved through the means of faith! They

trusted the Lord. And, as a result of that trust, they obeyed. In God's eyes, I believe, this is *keeping* the law. But to press this a little more from Romans, Paul says in chapter 8 because of Jesus, the righteous requirement of the law is fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. This fits the context of these verses. And so, I believe that sometimes when the Scriptures talk of perfect obedience to the Law and other times, it can refer to an obedience that is birthed by and works through faith. So, here, I believe we need to read this not as obeyed "perfectly" but obeyed from a changed heart.

This fits the idea of circumcision even. When did Abraham exercise faith? Before or after circumcision? Before. Then Abraham is circumcised. Faith, which in just a few verses is described as a circumcision of the heart, preceded physical circumcision. Therefore, Paul says to the Jews, if you break the law, your physical circumcision doesn't matter at all! Then Paul goes on into verse 26 and says if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, won't his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?

Again, this follows the scenario with Abraham. When was Abraham "saved" so to speak? At circumcision? No. At faith! So, the uncircumcised person is regarded as circumcised at faith! By the way, I do not like how the ESV translated the word "regarded." I think the word is better rendered "counted." This word is used often by Paul to refer to God judging something to be the case. He counts people righteous (not because of a righteousness of their own). He counts people as circumcised (not because they are circumcised). Instead, this is God's judgment. And, whatever God says is reality, is reality! And the unbelieving, religious, moralistic Jew should get this logic. Some people who are not circumcised were a part of God's people. Other nations had been blessed. Circumcision is merely a sign. Faith is essential.

By the way, Christian, get this! God counts you as a keeper of the Law. God counts you as circumcised. But how can this be? Well, Paul will get to that in the next verses, but I simply want you to ponder the amazing reality that God counts you a keeper of the Law, Christian. All the weight of trying to perform. All the desire to ensure that God loves you today and keeps loving you tomorrow. That falls by the wayside when you realize that God loves and accepts you fully and completely, Christian. Through faith, you are considered "circumcised." You are part of God's family.

Therefore, the question goes back to the Jew, "Are you keeping the intent of the Law?" They should be feeling the claws of God gripping into them to tear away the sinful flesh. What's said here would be completely jolting to a Jew. To them, to be circumcised meant they were God's covenant people. They were part of God's family. Paul says, "You are not part of God's family if you break the Law." Not only that, uncircumcised people are counted as part of God's covenant people! And, by the way, "uncircumcised" was simply Jewish shorthand to mean Gentile.

So, true obedience matters. The obedience of faith *matters!* By the way, Jesus speaks the same way in the Sermon on the Mount. In showing the weightiness of the Law, he calls people to trust him! The Law was always intended to show the faithfulness of God and our need for him. So, Paul presses in on the Jewish people again. They say they're circumcised, and Paul says, "But do you have the obedience of faith?" Circumcision and religious rites cannot rescue you from God's righteous judgment.

So, think of an application for us today. We don't have the celebration of circumcision, but we do have baptism. Replace the word "circumcision" with "baptism." Baptism is indeed of value if you actually follow Christ! In that statement, we aren't saying "following Christ perfectly," we're saying looking to him, trusting him, believing on him, by his grace obeying. If that's not you, then your baptism means

nothing! You might as well just go for a swim in the water. There's no point to a baptism if it doesn't speak to faith in Jesus and that faith leading to following.

The implications are huge. It is possible for there to be people here this morning who trust in Christianity and not in Christ for your salvation. You think going to church is going to be enough. You think being a Sunday School teacher is good enough. You think trying hard to be nice to people will be your righteousness. You think because you have had positive spiritual experiences, you're good. These things are of eternal value only *if* you have a heart change! Obedience of faith is required. Are some of you feeling the nails peeling at your skin?

Paul now moves on here to reveal that there are people who have had a heart change without the rituals. Circumcision will not rescue from God's wrath because faith-birthed obedience is required. And also because

2. The uncircumcised "keeper of the law" will condemn the Jews (v. 27).

Read verse 27 again with me: ²⁷Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. ⁴

When Paul uses the word "Then" in verse 27, he is essentially saying, "We know the uncircumcised person who has a heart change is counted as righteous." So then, the physically uncircumcised not only will experience all the blessings of God in salvation, but those people will actually condemn the Jews who remain unchanged in their heart! Even though they have the written code. Even though they have been physically circumcised. They will be condemned. Jesus will say "Depart from me, you workers of iniquity, I never knew you!"

Paul says in Galatians 3 that the Law is not of faith, and I take that to mean that the Law is not to be trusted in. Yet, that's exactly what so many people have done. Even in our day, I hear people say, "Well, all religions are basically the same. Be nice to people!" That's not my religion. The Bible says "Be reconciled to God! See you're a sinner and only Jesus can bring forgiveness for your sins!" Don't trust in your works. Don't trust in your growth in self-discipline. Trust Jesus.

You know, I love the city of Holland. When I talk to longtime friends who haven't been here, I tell them they have to come. It's one of the best cities I know! The people are generally friendly. There's a church on every corner. We have Tulip Time with smiley faces. But here's my concern. People equate church-going and morality to actually being a follower of Jesus. I know people, some of you even here, who have been saved out of your religious morality. You were blinded by your sin, involved in church. I said it last week, I have to say it again, "If you don't want Jesus, you don't have Jesus!" If you don't want to follow him, then be honest with who you are and stop blinding yourself. Don't say, "Well, I do a lot better than those other people in church. I tithe, I am hospitable, I have done many good things through the years!" None of that matters if you don't look to the Lord for reconciliation and life with him!

The non-baptized 6-year-old child who just trusted Jesus a month ago is better off than you are! Why? Because **salvation isn't about age and actions. Salvation is about Jesus!** So, in the judgment, Jesus says that these people who have genuinely trusted in the Lord and have the obedience of faith will condemn

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 2:27.

those religious moralists? This doesn't mean that Christians take God's judgment seat, but instead, this means that they are used at Exhibit A's in condemning religious moralists.

Well, at this point, we should be saying, "how can I be set free from God's wrath?" Paul takes us into verses 28-29. There we see

How?

Only by an internal change of the heart (vv. 28-29).

I've already stated this, but verse 28 makes this more explicit. Let's read it again: ²⁸For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. ²⁹But 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. ⁵

The word "for" means Paul is continuing to build off of what he has said. "Keeping the law" relates directly to an internal change. So, Paul says the only way you can actually obey is if you experience true circumcision. Circumcision is not outward and physical. But Paul first says something even more shocking. Jewishness isn't ultimately outward and physical! What? I thought only ethnic Jews were Jews! Well, not in God's redemptive plan! When God told Abraham all the nations of the world would be blessed, he meant that all people from all nations would constitute his people. Therefore, Peter will even refer to Christians as part of God's holy nation and a royal priesthood. Why? Because in the New Heaven and New Earth, there is only *one* people of God. And all of them are Jews because they were Jews inwardly!

By the way, this doesn't mean that ethnic Jews do not matter today in history! Paul will talk about ethnic Jews in Romans 9 and 10. But Paul is also emphasizing the great plan of God in saving people from all over the world. And so, Paul says in verse 29 that a Jew is one inwardly and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit.

This was always God's intention. In Deuteronomy 10:16, God says to the people, **"¹⁶ Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn."** ⁶ God also says in Jeremiah 4:4, **"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."** ⁷ Paul is not saying anything new here. Physical circumcision doesn't save.

But at this point, the people could have said, "We've tried to circumcise our hearts, but we can't!" Like Eustace, they've taken their own claws and simply tried harder. But then should remember the words of Ezekiel 11:19-20 that say, **"¹⁹ And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, ²⁰that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God."** ⁸

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 2:28–29.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Dt 10:16.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Je 4:4.

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Eze 11:19–20.

Oh, if the religious moralist would just lay down and say “Lord, you must save me,” then God’s piercing Law has worked! It’s summoned you to trust Jesus. And you see Jesus. Will you trust him? As Paul said in Romans 1, Jesus and what he did for wretches is good news! We, in our sinfulness. In our morality and also in our overtly sinful behavior, have suppressed and rejected God. We are estranged and cut off from God. Yet, we were created for him. Apart from God, who is life, we find death!

And yet, instead of hating us, Jesus came to this earth and loved human beings! Jesus lived the perfect life we could never lived, and then he took the wrath of God, satisfying it on the cross! Now, anyone who looks to him for salvation is no longer cut off from God, instead, we have circumcised hearts. Elsewhere in Ephesians, Paul writes this: ¹¹ **Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—** ¹² **remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.** ¹³ **But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.** ⁹ The blood of Christ refers to Jesus taking the covenant curse on himself. He bled. He was forsaken and cut off from God on the cross. Forsaken! Why? Because only he could satisfy God’s punishment for sinners. You in all your efforts to try to self-justify will only condemn yourself more! You might peel layers off, but you cannot give yourself a new heart.

If you are a religious moralist, I pray you’d lay on your back and cry out to the Lord, “You give me a new heart of flesh, not this stony one.” He can! You see that these Old Testament passages coincide with Paul’s words here. The person with the heart of flesh actually will keep his rules. They’ll obey. And they will be considered God’s people! So Paul says here, a Jew is one inwardly. Circumcision is of the heart. And only God’s Spirit can change the heart! Will you turn to him for salvation? Will you turn to the Lord for rescue?

Even as I say these words, I understand the resistance you may be feeling. Maybe you say, “But I’ve been good. I grew up in church. I have spiritual feelings. I read my Bible.” I recall a story that was spoken of by Donald Barnhouse in a sermon and broadcast nationwide on CBS radio about a century ago. He was concerned about the rise of what people have called the Social Gospel. A belief that good works were essentially on par with the gospel of Jesus. **“Barnhouse speculated that if Satan took over Philadelphia (the city where Barnhouse pastored), all of the bars would be closed, pornography banished, and pristine streets would be filled with tidy pedestrians who smiled at each other. There would be no swearing. The children would say, ‘Yes, sir’ and ‘No ma’am,’ and the churches would be full every Sunday . . . where Christ is not preached.”** (quoted from the introduction of *Give them Grace* by Elyse Fitzpatrick, p. 11). That may not have happened in Philadelphia. But it could happen anywhere? Including Holland. So friend, ask yourself, “Who is Jesus to you?” If he is not the One in whom you trust; reading the Bible, growing up in church, being good, not being an alcoholic, not viewing pornography, doesn’t matter for eternity. Why won’t you lay down and let Christ peel the dragon-like, non-human scales of the bondage of sin off of you?

I know, at this point, you could say, “But what will people think?” How exhausting to think this way! You’re really going to live for what other people think? Hear me clearly, God sees your heart. And someday in the judgment, everyone will know. But even now, he knows exactly who you are! And Paul ends verse 29 saying, “His praise is not from man, but from God.” What do you really want? Do you want people saying, “Oh, you are such a great person, all the while being the religious hypocrite – never

⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Eph 2:11–13.

confessing your sin and depending on Jesus?” Or, do you want God to change your heart and God to rejoice over you as his child? Why would you reject so great a salvation?

If you realize this, you’ll rest. You’ll realize that you can admit your sinfulness because God doesn’t count you as his child because you externally act like an obedient child. No. God counts you his child because Jesus, God the Son, gave you his righteousness!

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