

7. Learning Why the Jews Thought They Were Right with God

In our last topic, we saw that we want to help our physical and spiritual children learn why all people have the law written in their hearts. We saw that when people have a conscience that accuses them that they do one of two things. Some may continue to reject their conscience until they sear the conscience and no longer feel guilt. Many will have their conscience continue to accuse them and may turn to a painkiller to try and forget the guilt that they feel. Today, we are going to see that many of the Jews living in the time of the New Testament thought that they were right with God. We are going to see that God also showed that they were guilty of sin.

Romans 2:17-20 says, “Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, and know *His* will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law.” In the time of the New Testament, many Gentiles came to the Jewish synagogues to hear the Jews teach from the Old Testament. This caused the Jews to think that they were living good lives because they knew the Word of God in the Old Testament.

We see several key things that help us to understand the Jews in that day. First, we see that the Jews rested in the law. Many of them thought that they were keeping the law of God. They were like the rich young ruler that asked Christ in Luke 18:18, “...Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Here, we see that he thought that it was his right to inherit eternal life because he worked hard to do what was right and keep the law. In fact, he thought that he had successfully kept the law. Such Jews would boast about their relationship with God.

Because the Jews knew about God, they thought that they knew the will of God. They gave their approval to the things that they had learned from the Word of God. They felt that they had been fully instructed by others so that they understood the law. That is why James later wrote to the Jews in James 1:22, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” Many of the Jews had deceived themselves. That is why Christ told Nicodemus in John 3:3, “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’” Christ knew that Nicodemus needed to understand how to have spiritual life.

In fact, many of the Jews thought that they were helping the Gentiles as they taught them the law and encouraged them to follow the law. They were persuaded and convinced within themselves that they were actually serving as guides to the blind Gentiles. They thought that they were bringing spiritual light into the darkened hearts of the Gentiles by teaching them the law. They felt that they could teach those who lacked knowledge of the Word of God. In fact, they thought that they were effective instructors as they taught those that they thought were like infants. They really thought that they had perfect knowledge of God and could teach the truth that was in the law.

However, Romans 2:21-23 says, “You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself?”

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You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law?” It was true that the Jews knew the Old Testament law and were able to teach it to others. Christ said in Matthew 23:3-4, “Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, *that* observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay *them* on men's shoulders; but they *themselves* will not move them with one of their fingers.” They thought that knowledge of the law was sufficient. They did not think about the fact that they were not obeying the very things that they were teaching others.

The Jews were teaching others that it was wrong to steal while at the same time they were quick to steal from the widows and others who were unable to defend themselves. Matthew 23:14 says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation.” They thought that they were smart businessmen when they stole the house of a widow and then prayed a long prayer for the widow asking the Lord to help the widow find a place to live. In John 8, the scribes and Pharisees were accusing a woman who they said they had caught in the very act of adultery. Since they only brought the woman, the one who committed the adultery with her was probably standing there and pointing an accusing finger at the woman. They would say that the reason they looted the temples of idols was due to the fact that the worship of idols was sin, even though they kept what they took from those temples for themselves. In fact, they were guilty of dishonoring God by the various ways that they were breaking the law.

We see how the actions of the Jews caused many of the Gentiles to respond. Romans 2:24-27 says, “For ‘the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,’ as it is written. For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you who, *even with your* written *code* and circumcision, *are* a transgressor of the law?” The fact that the Jews taught the law and then broke the law themselves caused many of the Gentiles to blaspheme the name of God.

The Jews thought that they were right with God because of the fact that they were circumcised. God said that circumcision was profitable to those who had their trust in the Lord and were keeping the law as a result. However, for those who did not trust in the Lord and continued to disobey the Word of God, we see that their circumcision meant nothing. In contrast, Paul wrote that a Gentile that had his trust in the Lord so that he had the Holy Spirit to give him the strength to be obedient to the Lord would be counted as circumcised by the Lord even though he had not been physically circumcised. He said that the person who had his or her trust in the Lord would judge those who were circumcised but continued to break the Old Testament law. Here, we are reminded of the fact that God had given the Jews some great blessings, but those blessings meant nothing to those who continued to live in their sins.

That is why Romans 2:28-29 says, “For he is not a Jew who *is one* outwardly, nor *is* circumcision

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that which *is* outward in the flesh; but *he is* a Jew who *is one* inwardly; and circumcision *is that* of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise *is* not from men but from God.” Here, we see that God wanted every person to understand the real source of blessing. In Genesis 17:10-11, God told Abraham, “This *is* My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you.” God had given Abraham some very special promises that were both physical and spiritual. God wanted the descendants of Abraham to enjoy these promises.

However, we see here that the outward circumcision was to really be a picture of the obedience to God in the heart. God spoke to Samuel in 1 Samuel 16:7 and said, “But the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have refused him. For *the Lord does* not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.’” Here, we see that the Lord looks at the heart of each person and not at outward circumcision.

The Jews, as a nation, have enjoyed some of the physical blessings of being the covenant people of God but no one can enjoy spiritual blessings unless that person has his or her sins forgiven. That is why Romans 10:9-10 says, “That if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” All people must believe the promises of God from their hearts in order to enjoy the spiritual blessings that God has promised. This inward belief is the circumcision of the heart.

We also see that the circumcision of the heart comes from the Holy Spirit and not from just knowing the law of God. At the moment we repent and place our faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit comes into our human spirit. Romans 8:16 says, “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” The Jews considered themselves the children of God because they were descendants of Abraham and Abraham had received the promises of God. However, when we place our faith in Christ we become true children of God. Someone once said, “God has many children but no grandchildren.” The Jews did not become the children of God just because of the fact that they were descendants of Abraham. Each Jew needed to come to God by faith in Christ.

We also see that all those who come to God through Christ will receive the praise of God. This is due to the fact that God declares each person who comes to Him through Christ to be righteous, because He places the righteousness of Christ on each one of us when we come to Him in repentance and faith. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children learn to explain to all people how to become right with God.