

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Romans – Jesus’ Gospel Sets You Free!

The Special Case of God’s Chosen People

Study #4

(Romans 2:17--3:8)

Introduction: The Jews - like everybody else, but more so...

The Jew and the Jewish people are historical anomalies. Through the centuries, the Jews have survived Egyptian bondage and wilderness wanderings. They have withstood attacks from ancient Amalekites and Philistines, Arameans and Assyrians, Babylonians and Romans and, in our own time, Nazis and others.

The Jews have flourished in times of spiritual revival. They have survived times of apostasy. They have maintained their cultural identity through long centuries when they had no homeland.

They have lived through more than one holocaust and even now Israel survives as an embattled people in a land mass a little bit smaller than the Dallas/Ft. Worth Metroplex¹ surrounded by nations opposed to them. Their struggle to survive is as current as Iran’s bold threat to destroy them.

While many people are tenacious, the Jews are especially noted for tenacity. Or, as another has said, *“The Jew is like everyone else, only more so.”*

¹ Comprised of thirteen counties in north Texas, the principal cities are Dallas and Fort Worth, but also include dozens of other municipalities, eleven of them with populations over 100,000. The Metroplex is listed at 8,991 square miles. The stated size of Israel is 8,000 square miles.

No wonder the first prime minister of the renewed state of Israel (1948), David Ben-Gurion once said, *“In Israel, in order to be a realist, you must believe in miracles.”*

Today, we will continue in our study of the book of Romans by looking at God’s special dealing with the Jews.

First, though, to review...

Over the last two Sundays, we have seen human sinfulness and guilt before God. The whole race, even given the spectacular self-revelation God has given in nature, has refused to give God the worship He deserves.

This refusal to worship has led God to pour out His wrath on us in the form of *“giving us over”* to impure hearts, degraded passions, and depraved minds. All of this has placed us all under God’s condemnation.

As we saw last Sunday, even those who seek to live good lives are under the judgment of God because NOBODY *fully* lives up to: (1) the requirements of the Old Testament Law, (2) the moral standards of their society, or even (3) the dictates of their own conscience.

This morning, Paul is still dealing with the realities of God’s judgment on mankind,² but he is specifically addressing the situation of the Jews, God’s chosen people.

The passage before us today is important to all of us here for at least two reasons, whether we happen to be Jewish or not.

First, the Jews’ story is a huge part of the story of Scripture. To miss what God has done and is doing with the Jews is to miss an enormous part of His overall plan for the world.

And second, what is applicable out of this passage to the Jews in a primary way (who were God’s chosen people under the Old Covenant) has serious application to us - in a secondary way - the church-going, believing in Jesus, indwelt by the Holy Spirit people of God today.

² Some commentators believe that Paul was directly addressing the Jews at the beginning of chapter 2 (I don’t), it is obvious that he is doing so here.

In the first part of our passage for today, Paul's burden is to demonstrate that whether we are talking about Gentiles or Jews, it's not the external that matter most. It's what's *inside* that counts.

It's What's Inside that Counts (vv. 17-29)

God's Chosen People: Self-Confident Superiority (vv. 17-20)

[17] But if you bear the name "Jew"³ and rely upon the Law and boast in God, [18] and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law⁴ [19] and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, [20] a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth

The Jews claimed special standing before God (vv. 17-18)

The Jews wore the title "Jew" like a badge of honor. They were proud of their heritage and their history.

And here, Paul defines the Jew as someone who, first of all, has a special standing before God. Why? Because of Scripture.⁵

Like Christians, the Jews are and always have been "people of the Book." Jews revere the teachings of the Bible and base their lives on it.

³ The term "Jew" is first used in 2 Kings 16:6. It is rendered there "**Judean**" in my translation, which only shows that the word "Jew" is etymologically related to the word "Judah." Judah was one of the twelve tribes of Israel, and the land in which Judah settled became known as the land of the Judeans, or the land of the Jews.

⁴ The Jews knew that they were able to make distinctions between that which is morally right and wrong, on the basis of what Scripture says. From the way Paul phrases these words, it is likely that he was saying that the Jew found security in his obedience to the Law. There may even be the thought of forcing God to accept him on the basis of his obedience to that Law (and that was *never* the purpose for the Mosaic Law).

⁵ We call it the "old" testament, but of course they would have never called it that. It was, and is, the only testament they recognize.

The Jew knows God's will because that will was expressly revealed through the Law and the prophets and the wisdom literature and the poetry of the Old Testament.

Because of the special revelation of God through Scripture, the Jews tended to have a very high view of themselves, especially in comparison to other, less privileged peoples.

The Jews claimed special advantage over other people (vv. 19-20)

So, the Jews did actually have spiritual advantages. Being God's chosen people meant they always had a lot going for them.

Through the Law, the Jew not only knew God's will, he could instruct others from it. Sadly, though, he rarely did so. And that was the failure of the Jew - not in what he didn't know or didn't have, but in his poor stewardship of the blessings he had received.

Case in point - the story found in the short prophecy of Jonah. You and I may read Jonah for its great fish story or for the wonderful scene of the repentance of the wicked Ninevites.

But, this four chapter book was written as a rebuke of the Jews for their chronic lack of willingness to take the message of God's salvation to the heathen nations, WHOM GOD ALSO LOVED.⁶

The Jews failed "the stewardship test" (Exhibit A: Jonah)

In the book of Jonah, there are lots and lots of heroes.

The godless sailors on the ship believed in God. The sea wind blew and stopped blowing at God's command. The fish/whale obediently swallowed its kosher meal.

⁶ As we will see later on in Romans, the great tragedy of the Jew was that he refused the task of world evangelization. It was given to the church, which has come to be so primarily composed of Gentiles, so that the plan is reversed, and is not, as it should be, the Jew evangelizing the Gentile, but the Gentile evangelizing the Jew.

The Ninevites repented before God at the preaching of Jonah's message of destruction. The gourd plant grew as appointed to shade Jonah's head. The hot sun beat down on Jonah and the west wind baked him, per the will of God. Even the worm went on command to eat the plant.

The only villain in the whole story is Jonah, God's prophet, who headed west toward Tarshish as soon as God told him to go east to Nineveh!

Now the book of Jonah tells a literal story, but it serves to picture the Jew's long history of refusing to be what Paul says they were designed to be from the beginning, *[19]...a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, [20] a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature.*

So, they failed the stewardship test by not spreading the good news of salvation through the one, true God. But they also failed to keep the commands of God, themselves.

While they knew God's commands, Paul - writing as a Jew himself - accused his fellow-Jews of not practicing what they preached.

God's Chosen People: Self-Evident Hypocrisy (vv. 21-24)

Does your walk measure up to your talk? (vv. 21-22)

We have all heard of the teacher who doesn't practice what he preaches. Maybe you've observed it. Physicians with unhealthy lifestyles. Bible teachers who lack integrity. Politicians who fail at statesmanship.

The sad tale of the teacher who doesn't practice what he preaches was common in first century Israel and Jesus had harsh words for them.

In Matthew 23 the Lord let fly with some stinging accusations of gross hypocrisy.

He didn't "call them names." He *named* them - "**hypocrites, blind guides, whitewashed tombs,**" and fools for the sin of professing one law of conduct, but practicing another.⁷

In that same passage Jesus told His followers, *[3] "All that [the scribes and Pharisees] tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds, for they say things, and do not do them."*

Now, having listened to Jesus, let's listen to the questions Paul asks of his Jewish readers here in Romans 2.

*[21] You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? [22] You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?*⁸

Paul says, "*Look in the mirror! Don't think you will be judged on the basis of what you teach and preach and approve. You'll be judged on the basis of what you actually DO.*"

And if you read carefully and look between the lines it may be clear that he is even calling his Jewish readers to look deeper than surface level. You can hear a Jesus-like probing of heart issues as well as behavior.

- Are you an adulterer? No? How about a lustful "adulterer at heart"?
- Are you an idolater? No? How about an idolater at heart?
- Do you rob temples? No, not literally? Well then, do you not give to God what He is due?

⁷ I am indebted to Johnathan Godsey for making this distinction for me many, many years ago.

⁸ "**Robbing temples**" might have reference to profaning God's majesty or robbing God of His honor by withholding what was due in the worship of the temple. But it might also literally refer to robbing heathen temples. (Murray) Nothing evoked the scorn of the Jew for his pagan neighbors more than idolatry. There was a well known incident (AD 19) in which four Roman Jews, led by one who taught Judaism to interested Gentiles, persuaded a Roman lady, a convert to Judaism, to make a contribution to the temple at Jerusalem, but appropriated it for their own uses (see verse 24). Hearing of this, the Emperor Tiberius expelled all Jews from Rome, bringing the name of "Jew" into disrepute among the Gentiles.

With those questions reverberating, Paul continues. He wants us to know that there are huge and awful consequences when God's people are guilty of hypocritical sin.

Hypocrisy dishonors God (vv. 23-24)

[23] You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? [24] For "THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU," just as it is written.⁹

Now how would you react if Paul had been writing these words about you and the impact your behavior was having on the reputation of God in the world? You'd be devastated!

And it would have been a devastating experience for a Jew of Paul's day to have read these words. But the words, while devastating, are true.

The sin of God's people - then and now - always impacts a watching world. It will turn off an otherwise interested outsider to the things of God.

Of course it is true that the Jewish people were perceived as oddities in the first century world.¹⁰ Their monotheism was misunderstood and their worship practices were totally out of step with modern, Roman times.

⁹ William Barclay affirms that the Gentiles did, in fact, blaspheme God *because* the Jews had shut themselves up into a rigid community from which all others were shut out, and because they showed to the heathen an attitude of contempt for their worship, along with a complete lack of concern for their neighbors' needs. The Jewish religion of the first century is pictured as that of the shut heart and the locked door.

¹⁰ It was rumored throughout the Roman Empire that the Jews had originally been a company of lepers who had been sent by the king of Egypt to work in the sand quarries. Some Gentiles believed that the Jews abstained from swine meat because they regarded the pig to be a god. Their observance of the Sabbath was generally regarded to be an excuse for laziness. Jews were accused of "atheism," because they didn't have any visible images of worship. And, there was evidently some good basis for accusing Jews of an attitude of basic contempt toward Gentiles.

But it wasn't the Jews' odd-duck-don't-fit-in qualities that were the stumbling-blocks to Gentiles placing faith in the one true God. It was the Jews' sin and hypocrisy.

Here is how the reasoning of an outsider goes when he or she sees the misbehavior of a believer in the one true God.

- A worshiping person tries to imitate his or her God/god.
- The believers I know are hypocrites and immoral and unethical.
- Their God/god must be of like character.
- THEREFORE, I want nothing to do with such a God/god!

Hypocrisy always bears bitter fruit. It did then and it does today.

When a Mom and a Dad make a rule for the family and then one of them routinely breaks the rule, the kids are bound to treat that rule with contempt.

It's like the man who complained that there was too much sex and violence on the DVD player. That's hypocrisy! It's ugly and repels rather than attracts people to faith.

In Paul's day, because the Jews were living hypocritically the Gentiles were not moved to follow the Lord.

But surely Paul will have something encouraging to say to and about the Jew. After all, they are God's chosen people. They had been given the Law. They did have the sign of the covenant - circumcision.

And as if reading our minds, Paul says next, "*Oh, and about circumcision. You're not a shoe-in for the Kingdom just because of that, either.*" (Yes, we talk about everything here at church...).

God's Chosen People: An Internal Jewishness (vv. 25-29)

Law-keeping and circumcision (vv. 25-27)

[25] For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.

[26] So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? [27] And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law?¹¹

The sign of circumcision

Under the old covenant, the rite of male circumcision was important. It signified that the boy who was circumcised was a part of the covenant community of God's people.

It was given to Abraham as a symbol of the covenant hundreds of years before the Mosaic Law. But the physical act of circumcision had never been intended to say, "*Salvation guaranteed. Ticket to eternal life. Forgiveness ticket stamped.*"

When circumcision is uncircumcision

Despite that, the Jews came to mistake the *sign* of the covenant for the *reality* of the covenant. A man who was circumcised was thought to be automatically bound for heaven.

Paul says here that if a Jew transgressed the Law, then the symbol - circumcision - was meaningless.

Try thinking of circumcision in terms of New Testament ordinances.

When someone who believes in Jesus takes the Lord's Supper here at church, they are blessed as they worship God. But if someone takes the bread and the cup having never trusted Jesus for salvation, it's just crackers and juice.

Same thing for baptism. A believer's baptism is a moving experience of testimony and witness and word. Without faith, though, baptism is just about getting wet.

¹¹ The faithful Gentile will be a witness for the prosecution (God). His obedience will be evidence of what the Jew ought to have been and could have been.

Taking the Lord's Supper and being baptized are both symbols to remind believers of inward realities. Without the inward reality, the ordinances don't mean a thing.

At the same time, the reality can exist without the ritual. A person can be saved, having believed in Jesus, without ever taking the Lord's Supper and without ever having been baptized in water.¹²

Here, Paul says not only is it possible to be circumcised and NOT be a member of the family of God. It is possible to be a member of the family of God WITHOUT circumcision.

When uncircumcision is circumcision

He's really not saying that the Gentile who keeps the Law becomes a Jew. It is more that, when it comes to eternal life, the real point has never been about nationality.

Whoever does what the Jew was to have done - trust in the Lord - receives the same blessings that the Jew does even if he doesn't have the special sign of the Jew (circumcision)! God's promises are not to a certain *race* of people, but to a certain *type* of person.

The contrast here is that between outward and inward.

The essential INTERNAL Jew (vv. 28-29)

[28] For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. [29] But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.¹³

¹² This is an important topic that I won't delve into in the message. But consider this: John's Gospel was written to tell readers how to have eternal life. Yet in that Gospel, baptism is never even mentioned as a requirement for eternal life. Yes, that is an argument from silence, but it is a very loud silence!

¹³ For the idea of "circumcision of the heart" in the Old Testament, see Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6.

Outward circumcision does not make a Jew. (v. 28)

Now, to a Jew, this probably would have sounded like the wildest heresy. And frankly, to deny Jewishness to an ethnic Jew doesn't seem to make sense today, either.

But, I think that what Paul is doing here is using the term "Jew" in a special sense. So stick with me...

The "outward Jew" is a person who has descended, physically, from Abraham.

BUT, not all "outward Jews" are Jews in the special sense of being a part of God's family. As well, not all Jews in this special sense are "outward Jews."

As Paul says in verse 29, Jewishness is a matter of the heart.

Heart-centered "Jewishness (v. 29)

There is a Jewishness, a "people-of-God-ness", that transcends national and ethnic borders.

And "*circumcision of the heart*" is not accomplished with a scalpel. It is a miraculous, regenerating, redemptive work of God's Spirit.

Paul's not denying the reality of the ritual act. It's just that the outward act has no spiritual significance except when accompanied by the grace in the heart which the external rite signifies.

And the status of this special "Jewishness" (the idea of being God's chosen special person) is available to everyone!¹⁴

¹⁴ Taken by itself, Paul could be understood to imply by these words that there is no longer a physical Israel as recognized by God, and that God is no longer dealing with Israel as a people, but only with the "inward Jew" - the Christian. However, that is not the case, as these verses do not stand alone. When read in conjunction with 3:1-4 and Romans chapters 9-11, it becomes clear that God does, in fact, have a future plan for Israel, the nation according to the flesh, descended from Abraham.

It is pointless to trust in any external act (circumcision, Lord's Supper, baptism, raising a hand, walking to the front).

And, Paul has focused all of his readers - Jew and Gentile alike - on the need to see the issues as fundamentally *spiritual* - not fleshly, fundamentally of *faith* - not works, fundamentally of *God* - not man.

It's what's inside that counts!

Now, we could read chapter two and come away thinking that being a Jew actually created disadvantage and liability before God.

Having spoken in such seemingly disparaging terms about external Jewishness, we might suppose that Paul would say that it really doesn't make much difference if a person is a Jew or not.

That's NOT what he is saying.

To Whom Much is Given, Much is Required (3:1-8)

The Benefits of Being a Jew (vv. 1-2)

[1] Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? [2] Great in every respect.¹⁵ First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God.

The great benefit of the Jew that Paul lists here is that they were entrusted with God's Word.

Notice that Paul doesn't say that God *gave* His Word - Genesis to Malachi - to the Jews, but that He *entrusted* it to them, implying a stewardship.

There was something that they were to do with that word. They were to obey it AND they were to share it. It was understood that failure to do either would result in calamity.

¹⁵ The point is not that the Jew has advantages in every arena of life before God. Rather, that there are certain advantages that the Jew has which are, in every respect great and important. "*First of all...*" might be read, "*Primarily...*"

Listen to the words of the prophet Amos,
[3:2] “You only have I chosen among all the families of the earth; Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.”

God didn’t say, “*You are My special people; you can do what you like.*” No, He said, “*You are My special people; you must do what I like.*”

Catch this. People in relationship to God and who have been especially blessed by God are not judged more lightly, but more severely.

What a message for us, today, who have been blessed by God because of our faith in Jesus. In one place, Paul writes that we who have trusted in Christ have been blessed with every spiritual blessing imaginable (Ephesians 1).

If Israel will be judged in light of the blessings she has received, how much more will we be judged (not condemned) at the Judgment Seat of Christ, who have been given so much more than even the Jews were!

So...

Paul is saying that some Jews - descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, members of God’s chosen people - will not believe and will thus not be saved.

That would be troubling to some. How could God’s chosen be lost? Doesn’t that reflect badly on God’s faithfulness? Paul asks the question out loud.

The Stewardship that Comes with Blessing (vv. 3-8)

God’s faithfulness (yes!) and His people’s sin (??) (vv. 3-4)

[3] What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? [4] May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, “THAT YOU MAY BE JUSTIFIED IN YOUR WORDS, AND PREVAIL WHEN YOU ARE JUDGED.”

God never promised that every person of Jewish descent would become a child of God. The promise of salvation had always been to those who exercised faith - like Abraham did.

Those who reject the promise will themselves be rejected. And unbelieving Jews are under the condemnation of God just as unbelieving Gentiles are under the condemnation of God.

That doesn’t make God unreliable or unfaithful.¹⁶ It shows that He is just and that He deals with each person without partiality, prejudice, or favoritism.

And that is the point of Paul’s final words this morning.

God’s righteousness (yes!) and His people’s sin (??) (vv. 5-8)

[5] But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.) [6] May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world? [7] But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner? [8] And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some claim that we say), “Let us do evil that good may come”? Their condemnation is just.¹⁷

There is real faulty thinking in those words! Here’s how the wrong-headed thinking goes: Since...

- the sins people commit give God the opportunity to demonstrate His righteousness.

¹⁶ Paul answers the charge that this way of dealing with Jews implies God’s unfaithfulness with the strongest answer possible in the Greek language: “**God forbid.**” (μη γενοιτα)

¹⁷ Someone had evidently accused Paul of antinomianism (roughly, the idea that keeping to ethical and moral behavior is not so important). Paul never did any such thing!

Therefore...

- sinners shouldn't be subject to His wrath, since our sin only makes Him look holy and pure by comparison.
- and, God should simply declare amnesty for sinners.
- AND, people should actually be encouraged to sin, since good (salvation) comes about as a result of sin!

No. Sorry. That's not the way it works.

The only just way for God to judge the world is on the basis of how we measure up against the standard of His holiness.

I suspect that over the next four weeks we may hear the major presidential candidates and men and women running for various offices across our land respond to some of the questions posed to them by reporters with, *"I won't even dignify that question with an answer."*

That is Paul's response here. And here is the message for today, boiled down to two core ideas.

Conclusion:

First, God has offered to each of us a gift of grace. Like the Jews of old, He knows that we can never be right before Him by our own efforts. Our only hope is to accept that gift of grace - and trust Jesus.

Maybe you have understood for some time the truth that Jesus died on the cross for your sins. You've known it, but you have never placed your trust in Him for salvation.

If that is you, why not do so today? Why not stop trusting whatever else you might have been trusting and turn to Jesus? Why not put aside hopelessness and hope in Jesus, the One who loved you enough to give His life as a sacrifice for your sins?

For all who have sinned - that would be me and that would be you - He is the only Savior, and He is waiting for you to call out to Him in faith to save you.

Second, those who have received that wonderful gift (eternal life in Jesus!) are honored to have been commissioned as Jesus' ambassadors to live for Him. We have been given much and it is our great privilege to give much in return.

Today we have seen that the Jews enjoyed a special position of privilege and blessing. That position brought along with it a great deal of responsibility.

With great privilege always comes great responsibility. In fact, that is the punch lines of one of Jesus' parables.

After telling a story about a man who knew his master's will and didn't do it, Jesus ended with, ***[Luke 12:48]...From everyone who has been given much, much will be required.***

The Jews didn't do well in stewarding the blessings they had received from God. They didn't bless their world.

Now, though, we have the opportunity to pick up where they didn't leave off and bless others, meet needs in Jesus' Name, love sacrificially, give generously, and share boldly with those we know.

Some time this week, why not take a few minutes, by yourself or with friends, to brainstorm about how you might bring blessing to others. After all, you've been blessed by God!

Sometime in a quiet spot with God, consider how much He has blessed you.

If He has only blessed you a little bit, then a little bit of love, a little bit of service, a little bit of generosity is perfectly appropriate.

But if, upon reflection, you realize that the blessings of God on you meet your crucial needs, supply you with transcendent purpose and meaning, provide total forgiveness for all your sin, and that He and His blessings will be with you for all eternity, well then, maybe the best words to describe the response you'll want to give are "over the top" and extravagant!