



The Book of
ROMANS

Small Group Study 1: Romans 1-3

Week Four: (Romans 2:17–29)

Key Verse

“On the contrary, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart—by the Spirit, not the letter. That person’s praise is not from people but from God.” - Romans 2:29 (CSB)

Key Principles

- The Old Testament taught that the law cannot save us.
- Having God’s Word is not a help to us in becoming righteous if we do not live by its words.
- We need God’s Spirit to live in a righteous way.

Read

We see in the Old Testament that God directly revealed to the Israelites what actions constituted righteousness in his eyes. He gave them the law, which was quite the advantage to knowing exactly what to do and what not to do to glorify God. Had they chosen to follow the commands of God's law, they could have been "a light to those in darkness" (2:19) and teachers of wisdom to the nations. But they could not, and their inability to attain righteousness on their own made them equal to those who had never heard God's Word.

The Jews of ancient times took pride in their "advantage." They valued circumcision because of what it meant—they were God's chosen people who had received God's law. But they failed to earn righteousness because they were only able to follow part of the law; they were not able to keep all of its commands. Paul says that they failed with things like stealing and adultery, which even the Gentile cultures knew were unrighteous. Thus, the supposed Jewish "advantage" when it came to attaining righteousness was practically not an advantage at all.

It's easy to read this section of Romans and think that these Jews were making decisions that were absurd. But doesn't this sound familiar? We have also been given a greater, unifying advantage: Jesus Christ! And although, as Christians, we claim his righteousness as our own, we still fail and give into sin. But praise God that through Jesus, our righteousness is counted as filthy rags and our unrighteousness was paid for by his blood. As believers, we get to put on the righteousness of Christ which not only saves us, but it serves as an equalizer as well. This is what we discussed in last week's study on Romans 2:1–16. Paul

is building on the text in 2:1-16 to show that the Jews, in all their pursuit of holiness and superiority were missing the point that the righteousness they needed was not their own—it was Christ's. Paul will explain this later on in Romans 3:21–31, Week Six in this study series.

It is important to note that everything Paul is saying here about circumcision, the law, and needing a new heart is not originally his idea. He's taking several pages out of the Old Testament to make these claims. Consider these statements from the Old Testament:

- The idea of circumcision is really a matter of the heart (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4).
- God has to put his Spirit inside us for us to have any hope of following his laws (Jeremiah 31:33–34; Ezekiel 36:26–27).
- Israel was supposed to be a light to the nations during the exile, but instead, they brought dishonor to God (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6; 52:5; Ezekiel 36:22–25).

Here is what these important passages teach us about the message of the Old Testament. First, the Pentateuch was trying to say so much more about faith and obedience to God than simply passing on a legal code of behavior. Second, the Pentateuch and the Prophets (books written by Old Testament prophets) both taught that the law would not be enough to save the Israelites. Third, the Old Testament clearly states that what it means to be truly circumcised has more to do with our obedience and relationship to God than what bloodline you come from. Thus, to truly be an Israelite is to be faithful to God, but the Prophets tell us that as time went on, the Israelites, like all of humankind, were

unfaithful to God and were unable to do what God required of them.

And so, God would have to intervene to help heal this broken, sinful people. God would become the light to those in darkness and the teacher of wisdom to all nations. God would reach into the heart of his people and put his Spirit within them in order to make a way for them to become righteous. Only by doing this himself is he able to get the praise and glory he deserved from the beginning.

The rest of Romans will show us how God intervened to bring righteousness to all nations through the work of his Son, Jesus. Jesus is the light to those in darkness (John 1:5; 3:19; 8:12; 12:35; 12:46; referring to Isaiah 9:2; 42:16) and he has brought the New Covenant that allowed God's law to be written on our hearts. A covenant is generally a binding agreement between two people, and this idea of a New Covenant is God's way of declaring the unconditional relationship that he desires to have with his people in Christ. Keep reading Romans, and we will soon learn more about God's amazing gift to his people in the New Covenant!

Study Guide

The following study questions are meant to help us wrestle with the text of Romans and see how the gospel displays God's righteousness. Set aside some time this week to meet with God and answer these questions for yourself. Complete each question *before* your weekly small group meeting. Then, when you gather with your small group, be prepared to discuss your answers together.



Read Romans 1:16–17 to remain focused on Paul's major points. Then, read Romans 2:17– 29 in preparation for this week's study.

Highlight

1. What are some false assumptions people make about obtaining God's approval? How does Romans 2:17–29 help us understand these false assumptions?
2. According to Romans 2:17–29, what is circumcision of the heart and how is it demonstrated?
3. Where do you see references to the Old Testament in Romans 2:17–29? List them below and discuss their significance with your small group.

4. Summarize this passage in your own words. What themes are common within your small group?

Explain

5. Why would some Jews think that God viewed them as superior to Gentiles? Where, in your life, are you tempted to view yourself as superior to others? How so?

6. What, according to Romans 2:12–16, is the relationship between God’s law and his judgment?

7. What other questions do you have from Romans 2:17–29?

8. This passage can leave us feeling hopeless about our inability to please God. As Christians, what hope do we have to be able to please God?

Apply

9. Romans 2:17–29 identifies where some Jews are acting in a hypocritical way—many of them took pride in the law, but at the same time, they were breaking parts of it. How have we, as Christians, been guilty of a similar type of hypocrisy? Share and discuss what it looks like to follow God’s commands in a way that honors him and brings him glory.

10. Just like some Jews found purpose and meaning in their ability to follow God’s law, where are you tempted to find purpose, affirmation, or belonging in something other than God? What does it look like to satisfy your desires for belonging, affirmation, and purpose in God’s gospel?

11. How does reminding ourselves of the gospel prevent us from practicing any form of idolatry? How can we preach the gospel to one another in Christian community so that we do not become self-righteous?

Respond in Prayer

In Romans 1–3, Paul references specific psalms in order to grow our understanding of God’s righteousness. Each week of this Study Guide will include a recommended psalm that helps us focus on the righteousness of our great God. Set aside some time this week to read through the selected psalm and use the prayer prompts below as your guide. We recommend praying through this psalm on your own at home and together with your small group. And for those looking for more passages to pray, feel free to return to Romans 1–3 and pray through those passages as well.

This Week’s Prayer Passage: Psalm 5

Read Psalm 5.

Pray through the following prompts, according to the A.C.T.S. method.

- **Adoration:** Praise God that, in his righteousness, he is opposed to all evil, wickedness, and deceit (5:4–6, 10). Praise God that he is our King, a king who upholds the righteous and deals justly with his subjects (5:7–8, 11–12).
- **Confession:** Ask God’s forgiveness for the ways you have distorted the truth or told lies. Ask God’s forgiveness where you have participated in evil and been an enemy of God. Ask for God to forgive you where you have used your words for death and not for life (5:9–

10).

- **Thanksgiving:** Thank God that he hears you and listens to your prayers (5:1–3), even though you have been unfaithful. Thank God that his steadfast love is abundant. Thank God that he has made you righteous through the blood of Christ and that he will bless the righteous and be our shield (5:12).
- **Supplication:** Ask God to make your ways straight and to help you act in a righteous way to your friends, neighbors, family, and even your enemies (5:8). Ask God that you will be an agent for life in other people’s lives. Ask God for the joy that comes with being part of his family (5:11).

