

Spiritual Insiders and Outsiders
Romans 2:17-29

I suspect that many of us here today consider ourselves spiritual outsiders. You look around at other people (even people here on Sunday mornings) and think, “They have every spiritual advantage. But me. . . I feel like I have all sorts of spiritual disadvantages, all sorts of things that make it difficult (if not impossible) for me to experience a close, growing relationship with God.”

This feeling of being a spiritual outsider might flow from a variety of different factors. Perhaps it’s your family of origin. Whereas others had nourishing, God-centered homes, you felt like you were on your own. Perhaps it’s your past - what you’ve done or what was done to you. While everybody has disappointments in their past, your past dominates your life. Perhaps it’s relational. Whereas it seems like others very naturally develop relationships with people and with God, every relationship is hard for you. It could be any number of other things: your health, an addiction or compulsion, a relationship (you’re married and you wish you weren’t, or you’re not married and you wish you were). You feel like a spiritual outsider.

I would never deny that these things affect our lives in dramatic ways. Nor would I deny that some people have spiritual advantages over others because of family and temperament and circumstances. But today’s passage makes clear that spiritual advantages don’t translate into being a spiritual insider. Paul argues throughout Romans that every single person has equal access to God through faith in Jesus. This access to God applies not only to our salvation; it also applies to our sanctification (our growth and progressive holiness). That’s where it’s often the toughest: “Yeah, I know I’m saved by grace. . . but I’m an outsider when it comes to spiritual growth.” My desire is that you would leave here today with hope.

In the world of Jesus and Paul and the other apostles, the Jews saw themselves as spiritual insiders. They viewed the Samaritans and the other Gentiles as spiritual outsiders who didn’t have much chance with God. This attitude bled over into the thinking of the early Jewish Christians. The book of Acts records how the early church wrestled with this issue and finally came to the conclusion that you didn’t have to become Jewish to be a good Christian (see Acts 15). You didn’t have to be circumcised and keep the requirements of the Law. Gentiles could come to God the same way as Jews: through faith in Jesus Christ.

Romans was written to a predominantly Gentile church (see 1:13). These Gentiles (and any Jews in their midst) needed to be convinced that being Jewish didn’t make you a spiritual insider with God, and being Gentile didn’t make you a spiritual outsider. It would have been very natural to think that spiritually the Jews were first-string all-stars and everybody else was second- or third-string. They needed to understand that everybody has the same access to God through faith in Jesus. I want us to “hear” today’s passage (Romans 2:17-29) the way that the Gentiles in the church at Rome might have heard it. I want each of us to be convinced that in Jesus there are no spiritual outsiders. (Actually I want you to believe that you are a spiritual insider with God.)

In the second half of Romans 2 Paul continues to use a literary devise known as a diatribe in which he debates with an imaginary opponent to surface and address issues. Paul has had the Jews in mind since the beginning of chapter 2, but in verse 17 he addresses his Jewish brothers directly. He's leading up to the conclusion that both "Jews and Greeks are **all** under sin" (3:9) and that "the righteousness of God" comes through "faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe" (3:22). Let's see how his argument unfolds.

Those considered spiritual "insiders" [the Jewish people] failed to live out their calling in the old covenant. (Romans 2:17-24)

Paul begins by listing five privileges (or benefits) of being Jewish by birth. As we'll see, some of these privileges were squandered or misappropriated; but they had the potential of bringing spiritual advantage.

17 But if you bear the name "Jew" 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 Law,

Let's briefly consider each of these five privileges. First, to "bear the name Jew" simply meant that out of all the people on earth, they belonged to the people who were in covenant relationship with the one, true living God. Second, to "rely upon the Law" probably didn't reflect a healthy dependence upon the Law but a false assurance that since they had the Law their relationship with God couldn't be questioned. Third, to "boast in God" was to delight in Him as their highest good. In Jeremiah 9:23-24, God challenged the people of Israel not to boast in wisdom or might or riches, but "let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows me." Knowing God was supposed to be their only boast.

Fourth, to "know His will" meant to have the knowledge of what God really wanted for their lives. Fifth, to "approve the things that are essential" meant to agree internally with the things that really matter in this life. Knowing God's will and approving the things that are essential are a function of "being instructed out of the Law." The Hebrew Scriptures gave them knowledge and discernment that they otherwise wouldn't have. There was great benefit in being born and raised Jewish.

Paul next lists various aspects of their calling as Jews. Paul draws on imagery and phrases from the Old Testament. He especially has in mind their calling to influence others with the truth.

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,

Because they had in the Law "the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth," they were called to influence their fellow Jews and the nations. In chapter 1 Paul argued that

creation revealed certain invisible attributes of God to everyone on the planet. But God gave the Jewish people additional, specific revelation through the Hebrew Scriptures. This revelation gave them the confidence that they could be “a guide to the blind” and “a light to those who are in darkness” and “a corrector of the foolish” and “a teacher of the immature.”

But the problem, Paul writes in verses 21-24 is that the Jewish people failed to live out this calling. Notice how he points out their inconsistency in three ways:

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?

This is the proverbial accusation that they didn’t “practice what they preached.” Some people think that Paul is viewing “these activities in the light of the ‘deepening’ of the law taught by Jesus (Matt. 5:21-48)” (Moo, p. 165) where lust is adultery of the heart and hating your brother is murder from the heart. But Paul’s argument in this chapter is that they aren’t living out the demands of the Law, not that they aren’t obeying the teachings of Jesus. Even though many (if not most) Jews never committed theft or adultery or robbed pagan temples, there were prominent examples of those who did. Paul is establishing that merely having the Law didn’t mean that the Jews lived out their calling.

Paul concludes this paragraph in this way:

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.

Instead of “keeping the Law” (obeying the commandments), Paul writes that they “broke/transgressed the Law” as evidenced by their hypocrisy. Consequently, instead of being a light to those in darkness (i.e., the Gentiles), “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles” because of them; their lives were producing the exact opposite fruit of what they supposed to produce.

Paul alludes to Isaiah 52:5 in verse 24. In that passage, God cites the exile as an example of His name being blasphemed among the Gentiles. In Isaiah’s day if you were dragged off into exile, it was because your god was weak and powerless. Even though God had whistled for the Babylonians to come to Jerusalem and do His bidding, they would have thought that their gods were more powerful than Israel’s God. And so the name of God was blasphemed among the Gentiles because they had failed to live out their calling.

Paul’s argument in this paragraph is that those who were considered spiritual insiders hadn’t fulfilled their calling. Yes, they had spiritual advantages, but that didn’t mean they were automatically pleasing to God. In a similar way, you might need to stop viewing others as spiritual insiders - those who seemingly have all sorts of advantages because of spiritual heritage or circumstances. The point here isn’t to tear others down so that

you feel good about yourself. The point is to align your thinking with spiritual reality. We need to quit looking across the room and thinking, “Their spiritual advantages make them spiritual insiders.” We need to quit mentally giving ourselves an “out” by telling ourselves that we’re outsiders who never really had a chance to get close to God. That line of thinking squelches our faith and keeps us stuck in unbelief.

In the next paragraph (vv. 25-29) Paul begins to hint at God’s remedy to the failure of the Jewish nation to fulfill its calling. The remedy would involve God creating a new people for Himself without regard for their national identity.

God is fulfilling His purposes through spiritual “outsiders” [the Gentiles] who come to Him through the new covenant. (Romans 2:25-29)

In verse 25 Paul brings up another Jewish “identity marker” - circumcision. Paul argues that circumcision is only of value if it’s accompanied by obedience to the Law.

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.

If you read Genesis 17 you will see that God gave Abraham circumcision as “the sign of the covenant between Me and you” (Gen. 17:11). Circumcising an eight-day-old boy was a tangible, permanent way of saying that a child was being raised under the Law. Being uncircumcised was synonymous with being out of relationship with the God of Israel. You may remember David’s comment about Goliath: “Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should taunt the armies of the living God?” (1 Samuel 17:26).

Here Paul says that circumcision is valuable only if you “practice the Law.” Some commentators understand that Paul is saying that practicing the Law means “perfect conformity to the letter of the law” (Moo, p. 168). I tend to think that Paul is talking about a healthy, heart-felt practice of the Law - the way people like Moses, David, Isaiah, and Jeremiah practiced the law. For them circumcision was of value as a sign of the covenant; it certainly didn’t save them, but it did mark them out as being in covenant relationship with God. But, Paul writes, if you are “a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision”: you are no better than Goliath or any other Gentile who didn’t know God.

In verse 26 Paul introduces a possibility that an uncircumcised person might actually “keep the requirements of the Law.” He’s obviously not talking about keeping the “letter of the Law” because if you’re uncircumcised by definition you’re not keeping the letter of the Law (which mandated circumcision). He’s talking about fulfilling the spirit (or the ultimate purpose) of the Law. In chapter 8 Paul will say that “the requirement of the Law is fulfilled” in those who walk according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh. That’s what he’s talking about when he says:

26 So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?

Here he holds out the prospect of an uncircumcised man (i.e., a Gentile) keeping the requirements of the Law. Paul says that his “uncircumcision” will be “regarded as circumcision.” In other words, God is in relationship with such a person. Notice how he continues:

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?

Instead of Jews judging Gentiles for being sinful, Gentiles who keep the Law will judge Jews who transgress the Law. Again (as we saw in 2:13), having the Law isn’t what matters most; keeping the Law - living out its demands to love God and love others - is what really matters. In verses 28 and 29 Paul spells out more clearly who he’s really talking about. He introduces new spiritual categories.

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.

The ethnic categories of Jew and Gentile are no longer important spiritually. **Having** the Law isn’t what matters; **keeping** the Law is what matters. Being circumcised in the **flesh** isn’t what matters; being circumcised in **heart** is what matters. Paul is using the categories of the new covenant as they were described in passages such as Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36. The OT itself talked about the obsolescence of the old covenant; it anticipated the day when God would make a new covenant with the house of Israel. In Jeremiah 31 we read:

33 “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”

In Ezekiel 36 we are told:

26 “Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 “I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.”

Look at Romans 2:29 again.

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.

If we keep reading in Romans, Paul makes clear that he’s describing the person whose life has been transformed by a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. God

is now fulfilling His purposes through people who were once considered spiritual outsiders (the Gentiles). This happens through the new covenant in Jesus' blood.

What this means is that if you are a believer in Jesus, you are now a spiritual insider - not in some elitist sense, but in the sense that you really can't be any closer to God. You can't get any closer to the heart of God than being "in Christ" and having "Christ in you" through the Holy Spirit. Let that sink in for a minute. . . Your progress in holiness isn't ultimately a function of your personality or your past or your family of origin; those things certainly affect your life, but they aren't your identity and they don't define you spiritually. Your identity and your destiny are defined by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Believing this changes the way you think about your relationship with God and your spiritual growth; believing this can give you hope.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this message, we all have things in our lives that make us feel like we're on the outside looking in spiritually. I'm certainly no exception. At times I've been envious of other people's spiritual experience growing up. I love many things about my family. . . my awesome Jewish mother who prays for me every day, her steady spiritual influence in my life, etc. But my dad was largely absent from my life; consequently I really don't have an intuitive understanding of God as my heavenly Father. At times I've been bitter about things that I lacked growing up. But today's passage reminds me that any spiritual deficiencies in my history were addressed when God wooed me to Himself and rescued me when I was 20. When I entered into a relationship with Him through Jesus, I became a spiritual insider: He put His Spirit within me, He gave me every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ, He began a work in me that He will complete. Even though I have had and still have issues to work through, my salvation is sufficient. It really is.

I'd like to urge you to have this same confidence about your life and your circumstances. God really is sovereign over your life and calling. Even though others may legitimately have spiritual advantages over you, that doesn't mean they have an inside track to God. If you have trusted in Jesus, you are in Christ and Christ is in you. You can be sure that God has given you everything you need to thrive in your relationship with Him. We need to be careful not to insult God by thinking that the death and resurrection of Jesus aren't enough. We are people of privilege living in days of fulfillment!

Without in any way trivializing the challenges you have in your walk with God, I'd urge you to accept that your salvation is sufficient. In 2 Peter 1:3 Peter wrote that in Christ God "has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness." Accepting this doesn't eliminate all your challenges, but it does put them in a different light. Believing that you're a spiritual insider changes everything. It gives you the hope you need to keep seeking Him with things get tough. And it also gives you the audacity to believe that He will use you to bring others - even the most unlike people in our lives - into a relationship with Himself. God is fulfilling His purposes through people like you and me who know Him through faith in Jesus.