

Making the Cut

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[0 : 0 0] Well, maybe all those who went to VCYC would like to stand so we know who was there and remain standing throughout the sermon to keep you awake. Please sit down.

But I did say to someone before, to Amelia, that if you get tired, well, just stand. That's all right. Well, let's pray. God our Father, speak to us tonight and write your word in our hearts so that we may believe it and do it and receive praise from you as we glorify and honour you in our lives.

Amen. Well, the young couple came to see me and they sat down a bit nervous, as you would be coming to see the vicar. And they were nervous because they wanted to say the right things.

And they said, we want little Johnny done so he can go to heaven and nothing bad happens to him. See, baptism or christening or getting him done, which is what they had in mind, was the passport for heaven in their minds.

The magical watermark that guarantees entry to God's heavenly doorways. Now, alternatively, there are some who would say slightly different.

[1 : 1 4] They want to send their children along to a church school or to RE or maybe to Sunday school, less often these days, because they want them to know about God, because knowing about God is the passport for heaven.

They've got to know something about God for their eternal future and destiny. And sometimes it's not just parents thinking about their kids. Sometimes it's adults going to Bible class or being in a Bible study group or something because they want to know about God so that their knowledge will be their passport for heaven.

They're sort of spiritual VCE equivalent or something like that. And there are others who would say that it's not some magical ritual. It's not knowledge about God that matters, but it's actually knowing God, knowing God.

I know God personally. He's going to let me into heaven when I knock on the door. He is my passport to heaven. A few years ago, I've led a few, but the last trip I led to Israel, we arrived at the end of the trip at Tel Aviv Airport.

We queue up in a long queue, and being the leader of the group, I'm first. And they go through a great security rigmarole at Tel Aviv Airport, let me tell you. Have to be there three hours in advance, which on this occasion was a good move.

[2 : 3 0] And they get you to show their passport and all this sort of rigmarole before you even check your baggage in. Thankfully, the person in the group to whom this story applies was near the front of the queue.

No passport. You don't get very far out of Tel Aviv or any airport without a passport. You see, sometimes we think that we've got our passport and we actually don't.

We've got the wrong passport or the wrong card. I remember going to Lord's Cricket Ground a few years ago with my MCC Members Card from the MCG in Melbourne. I knew that it wouldn't necessarily guarantee me rights in, but I thought I'd try it.

Man, I said, oh, no, no, no, you've got to come back for the last half hour only when anyone can come in anyway, he said, looking down his nose at me. Well, I thought, well, I mean, I've been to Lord's before, but I thought it's worth another try.

So I walked around the other side of the ground to another gate, and the guy said, oh, do you have a card? Well, he said, I don't know about this. Just come in. Sweet talking, the right official got me in.

[3 : 35] Well, presenting the right entry ticket, the right card, the right passport is what you need to get into heaven. And there's no sweet talking God when you've got the wrong card, let me tell you.

You can't go up to the front door and God says, no, sorry. And there's no back door, you see. There's no round the other side of the ground to some ignorant groundsman. No, there's no calling God's bluff.

This passage is warning us not to rely on wrong passports, wrong cards, wrong what we might think are tickets into heaven. So we might think that baptism is our passport and we're wrong.

We might think that knowledge about God is our passport and we're wrong. We might even boast about our relationship personally with God and we may well be wrong.

St. Paul has been arguing, if you were here the last couple of weeks, that God's judgment applies to all. Everybody, without exception, in any age and place, whatever their racial, religious background, whatever period of history they live in, whatever their ignorance or knowledge of God is, they will face the judgment of God on the final day.

[4 : 45] And all are guilty of suppressing the truth about God. There is no excuse for any person who's ever lived. Even those who judge others out of their own knowledge or whatever, they're actually playing God and know better than those whom they judge.

We saw that last week. So those who are ignorant are without excuse. But what about those who particularly know a lot? It's about the Jews that Paul now is arguing in the second half of Romans chapter 2.

He's argued in effect of those who know little or nothing about God from the middle of chapter 1 through the middle of chapter 2 by and large. But now he focuses more clearly on those who've come from a Jewish background, who therefore know a lot about God.

They've got significant knowledge of God, actually. They're not ignorant. But what about these knowledgeable? Those who've received God's law, who've had the Old Testament as part of their heritage.

Those special people of God called the Jews in the Old Testament. Surely they've got the right passport to heaven. Surely they've got the entry ticket. Surely they've got the best seats.

[5 : 58] Well, Paul addresses that issue in these verses. But the words here, though, they apply to Jews, actually also, surprisingly, apply very clearly to us as well.

Us who are Christians or claim to be Christians. See, the Jews certainly claimed and had reason to claim that they had the title deeds of heaven. Paul lists, in fact, ten privileges that the Jewish people had.

That's why it's a long sentence, Jan, at the beginning. Firstly, their name. You call yourself a Jew. The word Jew derives from the tribe of Judah. It's a word that's actually only used in the very last bits of the Old Testament.

Judah was one of the twelve sons of Jacob, but the leading tribe of the kingdom of Judah, as it came to be known, before it was conquered by the Babylonians in 586.

So to belong to the Jews, to call yourself a Jew, to come from Judah, means that you come from Jacob, you come from the covenant promises that began with Abraham. It's a statement, a name of privilege.

[7 : 02] So if you call yourself a Jew, and if you rely on the law, as it goes on to say in verse 17, that is the law given to Moses at Mount Sinai, to all the people of Israel under the leadership of Moses before they entered the promised land.

And then if, not just knowledge, but if you boast in your relationship with the Lord, verse 17 finishes by saying. Not boast in the sense of arrogance, but boast in the sense of rejoice, and some element of confidence or security about your relationship with God.

I'm the chosen people, or I belong to the chosen people, and so on. And then the if continues. More privileges are listed in verse 18. If you know his will, that is through the law.

And Jews could certainly claim, yes, we do know the will of God. It's not an idle claim. It's not quoting here Jews boasting falsely. Yes, they did know the law of God, or the will of God, because they'd received the law.

The Torah given to Moses to all Israel. And if you, as the end of verse 18 says, if you are able to determine what is best because you're instructed in the law.

[8 : 07] Yes, in a sense, yes, they could do that. They could determine what is best. Again, it's not an idle claim. Again, it's a privilege that does belong to the Jewish people from the Old Testament times onwards.

You see, God has, without any doubt, revealed himself significantly to the Jewish people, as they came to be called through the Old Testament and the Old Testament law. Moreover, the list of privileges continues in the verses that follow.

They must take seriously the Old Testament and pass it on to others. So in verse 19, Paul says, And if you're sure that you're a guide to the blind and a light to those in darkness.

That is, not just that they've received the law for their own sort of comfort, but that as the law itself urges them to do, as Isaiah 42, which I think is what is being alluded to here, refers to, that Jewish people are to be a guide to the blind and a light to those in darkness, referring to the Gentiles.

That is, if you Jewish people are even evangelists to the Gentile world, as the Old Testament actually calls you to be. And if, as verse 20 says, a corrector of the foolish and a teacher of children.

[9 : 18] The Old Testament was very keen that Jewish people would be correctors of the foolish. That is, it's through the law of God that you'd be wise. Yes, the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, something that the Old Testament law actually is on about very clearly.

To lead other people away from folly. And if you're a teacher of children, again, the Old Testament law urged the Jewish people to be quite pedantic, literally, in teaching children, passing on the law to them, inscribing it, in a sense, in their heads and hearts.

So, here is the epitome of what the law actually wants a Jewish person to be like. Someone who's received the law, but is themselves a light to the Gentiles.

They're teaching children. They're guiding people away from folly and into wisdom. And the basis of this teaching, as verse 20 makes clear at the end, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth.

That's the if. Verse 17 to 20. Four verses. Ten privileges. All of which are valid. And we're talking here not about a Jew who is a nominal Jew.

[10 : 33] Not a Jew who is a bit disdainful of Old Testament law. We are talking about the best that you can imagine coming out of the Old Testament. Truly the Jews were greatly privileged people.

The chosen people of God. The law given to them is a great treasure indeed. Think of the Psalms, like Psalm 19, Psalm 119, which rejoice in the beauty of the law.

Their delight in the law. The sweet honey of the law. That's the sort of Jew that's being described here. If all of these privileges are true from these four verses, what's the heart of the sentence?

So that's actually not the heart of the sentence. The heart of the sentence comes in verse 21. You then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself?

You see, you've got all this stuff. You're claiming to be a teacher of children and leading people from darkness to light, from folly to wisdom. Why don't you teach yourself?

[11 : 39] Paul's not objecting to their Jewish teaching. He's not objecting to their privileges. He's not objecting to their evangelism. He's not objecting to their obedience to the law in general. But he does object to their hypocrisy.

Teach yourself is what he's saying. This long sentence, four and a half verses, is basically saying, teach yourself first. As I said last week, this is hyacinth bouquet religion.

That is, it's all about keeping up appearances. It's not what's going on in the inside. They're pretending. It's a charade. It's a veneer of piety. They're keeping up appearances.

And the questions that follow begin to hit home to this Jewish audience. As Paul imagines it to be. Will you not teach yourselves? While you preach against stealing, do you steal?

You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? In effect, the questions beg the answer yes. All three of those questions are infringements of the Ten Commandments.

[12 : 48] That is, they steal, they commit adultery, and they commit idolatry. Which breaks the first couple of commandments. Paul here is not limiting his questions to that.

He is sampling from the very center, the kernel of Old Testament law. That is, he's not dealing with peripheral things. He's not saying, oh well, actually you've fallen down because you actually forgot to look after your neighbor's tassel cloak or something like that.

That is, he's going to the very heart of it. Idolatry, theft, adultery, Ten Commandments. The big stuff. And he's saying in effect, you're committing those sins.

You're committing those sins. We're talking here about the ideal Jew in one sense, in all the privileges. But their hearts corrupt. They're breaking the central part of the law, the Ten Commandments themselves.

He's not saying that all Jews are adulterers or idolaters or thieves. But he is saying that all of them break the law. That's the logic of what he's saying here.

[13 : 58] These are accusations that are actually made by the prophets against Israel in the Old Testament as well. In that sense, Paul's rebuke is nothing new.

The climax of his accusation comes in verse 23. You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? So that's the heart of it. It's not actually that every Jew is an adulterer or idolater.

It's that every Jew breaks the law. For all the privileges that they've been given, for all the nobility of their life or the religious piety that they parade, they're lawbreakers.

They've broken the law of God. And the result of that is the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.

Instead of being light to lead darkness into light, the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles. See, Paul is saying, in effect, that your words without actions actually do the opposite of what is meant to be the case.

[15 : 05] Back in verse 13, it's not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law. These are people who are hearers. And for all their hard intent of actually trying to keep the law, they fail, is what Paul's saying.

He's not saying that they go about with abandonment of the law and deliberately infringe every command they can think of. He's here describing the epitome of a good Jew, a good Old Testament law keeper.

But they're lawbreakers. They haven't kept the law in its fulfillment. Now, in a sense here, for Christians, those of us who claim to know God's word, both testaments of God's word, the same sort of obligations are on us.

We're meant to be light to the world as well. We're meant to lead people from darkness into light. And yet, think about it, so many people turn away from Christianity because of the failure of Christian actions.

Our lack of love, our lack of care. I've met many people over the years who rightly or wrongly, say, I'm not going back to a church again. They don't love you.

[16 : 21] They're hypocrites. Divisions in the church turn people away from God. Dishonesty amongst Christians or Christian leaders.

Lying, sexual immorality, etc. Hindus in India think that Christians are immoral. Muslims think of Christians much the same sort of way, that we're just ethically lax.

It's part of why there is so much rampant, militant Islam in the world today. They don't understand that the Western world is actually not Christian. But even when they might see the church, they see failure.

And so God is dishonored. That's the great sadness that Paul's addressing that is still the case today. Paul then moves on to the heart of the problem.

And that's the problem of the heart. Because that's what he's been building up to in these verses. Here is a Jew who, to all intents and purposes, is striving to be a good, pious, religious, obedient Jew, but fails, and actually brings dishonor to God through their failure.

[17 : 29] And so he talks about and addresses the issue of circumcision. Now in the Old Testament, Jews, men, were to be circumcised. The command for that comes in Genesis 17. It's an odd command.

And as I've said before, when I was preaching on Deuteronomy just a few weeks ago, why doesn't God make it a fish symbol on the forehead? After all, everyone then complied to women as well. It wouldn't be exclusive. And everybody would see.

I mean, circumcision for men, nobody would see it. No one would know. What's the point of the sign? Well, obviously the point of the sign is for the person who's circumcised, not for others. And why that command in Genesis 17?

Well, in the previous chapter, Genesis 16, what does Abram do? Childless Abram, getting frustrated and impatient with God's promises. He goes and has sexual relations with his wife's maid to produce a child.

No, no, no, Abraham. Be circumcised. Remind yourself that you are to trust God's promises obediently.

[18 : 29] That's the point of it. That's why it's a sign of the covenant. In itself, it's not the thing. It's a sign of real circumcision. And that's what Paul is exposing in these last verses of chapter 2 here.

Circumcision, indeed, is of value if you obey the law. See, there's another privilege that Paul could have added in verses 17 to 20. You've got the law and all this sort of thing and you've got circumcision and you're circumcised.

Circumcision is of value, he says, if you obey the law, but if you break the law as you do, as he's just argued, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.

And we need to get a sense of the feel of language here. The uncircumcised are the Gentiles out there. Often Jews would regard the Gentiles with some disdain and call them the uncircumcised.

Read the story of David and Goliath and see that he's the uncircumcised Philistine. It's a statement of some disdain or contempt. If you are disobedient to the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.

[19 : 41] That is, you're no better than a Gentile. All the privilege of law and name of being a Jew and all this stuff in verses 17 to 20, it's nothing if you're disobedient.

And he goes on then and says in verse 26, if those who are uncircumcised, the Gentiles that is, keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision.

You see, for the Jews, circumcision was one of their key passports. It was their key privilege. They thought they were in. And Paul is saying, no, in fact, the uncircumcised are in effect circumcised if they obey and the circumcised are there.

They're uncircumcised if they disobey. Circumcision as an external right is, you see, in the end, nothing. And the result of this verse 27, those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law.

The Jews expected that on the final day they would judge the Gentiles. But the opposite is the case. For a person is not a Jew who's won outwardly nor is true circumcision something external and physical.

[21 : 02] Rather, a person is a Jew who's won inwardly and real circumcision is a matter of the heart. It is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.

That is, that in the end, the Gentiles who obey the law actually, in a sense, bring condemnation on the Jews who disobey the law. I wonder if you've heard of Stefan Nistrum.

He wasn't a member of ABBA and he didn't win Wimbledon. Stefan Nistrum is, however, in southern Sweden. Stefan Nistrum is in his 30s and until New Year's Eve, just gone, he'd lived in Sweden for three weeks of his life.

The first three weeks of his life. His parents were Australian, if I remember rightly. They happened to be holidaying in Sweden and the plane wouldn't allow them to return to Australia because the mother was pregnant and so Stefan Nistrum was born in Sweden.

Three weeks after his birth, his family came to Australia. What makes somebody a true blue Aussie? 99% of your life lived in Australia.

[22 : 18] The only language you speak is English with an Australian accent. All your education done in Australia all the work that you've ever done in Australia. Never been out of Australia apart from the first three weeks of your life.

No passport of any other country. You'd think that might make somebody a true blue Aussie. Not for the Australian government because he's a rapist. He's been in prison for 10 years in Australia and they decided that actually because he's not actually technically an Australian citizen, they deported him.

And so on New Year's Eve, Stefan Nistrum, for all the crimes he did in Australia, had only ever been in Sweden for the first three weeks of his life, finds himself with \$200 of taxpayers' money from Australia dumped at Stockholm Airport.

He knew nobody in Sweden. And there he is. Because Australia decided we don't actually want people like him in the country because he's not actually an Australian. Now I'm not actually wanting to make a political comment here, but it raises the issue what makes somebody a true blue Aussie?

Seems to be their place of birth and having a citizenship paper or a passport. Accent, colour of skin, parental heritage, none of that matters. Well what makes somebody a true blue Jew? Circumcision?

[23 : 32] Paul's argument here is no. Having the law? Paul's argument here is no. Racial dissent from Abraham? Paul's argument here and in chapter 4 later, is no.

All the things that the Jews might expect would make them true blue Jews if they ever use such an expression, Paul says no. What makes somebody a true blue Jew?

Inward circumcision of the heart. A person is a Jew who is one inwardly and real circumcision is a matter of the heart.

Now that would be a shocking thing for the Jews of Paul's day to hear that. But actually if they understood their Old Testaments properly, they ought not to be surprised by this statement that the real Jew is one who is one inwardly.

For it's there in Deuteronomy chapter 10 as I spoke on that chapter back in January. It's there in Deuteronomy 30 and in slightly different languages there a couple of times in Jeremiah and in Ezekiel as well.

[24 : 42] That is what the Old Testament law is looking forward to is a change in the heart. What the circumcision demanded of Abram was actually a sign of is the circumcision of the heart.

Something that ultimately God would do. You see what God only ever wants in the Old Testament and in the New, there's no difference really here is the heart that is right.

It's not about external obedience. It's not about veneers or putting up appearances of piety. We can't bluff God. We can't sweet talk our way into heaven.

We can't parade our lists of achievements and say, God, you've got to let me in. All of that is the wrong passport. Baptism, knowledge of God, religious duty, religious practice, going to church for 80 years of your life or whatever it is, counts for nothing.

It's the wrong passport. What God is looking for is a heart that is right. And Paul is not making this up. He's not saying something that is brand new.

[25 : 51] It's there in the Old Testament. His argument here is precisely an Old Testament argument. Deuteronomy 10, verse 16, circumcise the foreskins of your heart.

Deuteronomy 30, verse 6, on that day in the future, God will circumcise your hearts so that you do obey him and love him with all your heart and soul. It's an Old Testament argument that Paul is using here.

What's your passport to heaven? A heart that is right. How do we get a heart that is right? God has to do it. It's not our achievement. It's nothing we can do or boast in.

Paul is saying that true blue Jews are inward Jews. Their heart is right. A heart that is changed by God's Holy Spirit as we are identified in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So Christians are true blue Jews because our hearts have been circumcised. That's the New Testament difference from the Old. The Old look forward to the circumcision of the heart but there's nothing in the Old where it happens.

[26 : 56] The power to circumcise the heart is the power of the cross of Christ. The power of the resurrection applied in our hearts by the spirit of Jesus himself. So Christians are true blue Jews.

It's the heart change that leads to the obedience of faith. And that's what Paul is arguing in these chapters of Romans about the gospel of God concerning his son that is to lead adherence of the gospel to the obedience of faith.

It is the power of God internally to change our hearts. here he's arguing for Jewish readers as he's been arguing in the earlier chapter for Gentile readers that no one there is no exception can stand before God and claim that they've met his law unless God has worked in their hearts.

Paul is exposing the false passports at this stage of his argument. He hasn't really quite got to the true passport although that's coming at the end of three and beyond. baptism is nothing without a heart change from God's spirit.

Celebrating the Lord's Supper is nothing without a heart change from God's spirit. Reading the Bible every day of our life is nothing without a heart change from God's spirit. See the passport to heaven doesn't lie in what we do and it doesn't lie in the externals.

[28 : 21] And the externals might be good and right things to do but unless they're matched by an internal heart that is in love with God that is trusting and obeying God then in the end the externals count for nothing.

The people who on the final day receive the praise of God as the end of verse 29 describes are not religious people. They're not ones who've received lots of religious privileges Old Testament law or New Testament books.

They are the people whose hearts have been made right. by God and for God. They are the people who don't exchange the glory of God for lies and idols.

They are the ones who practice the obedience of faith from the heart. Where do we find the power for this? In the gospel of God concerning his son Jesus Christ his death and resurrection his powerful spirit.

God that's what we need and that's why we read this powerful word of which Paul is unashamed because it is the power of God for salvation both to Jew and to Gentile.

[29 : 37] God get within pity's who have harm and that's why him x we are on the ■ Lily Thank you.