

Romans 3:1-9, 19-20 (NKJV)

1 What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision?
2 Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God.
3 For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect?
4 Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar. As it is written: "That You may be justified in Your words, And may overcome when You are judged."

1

Rom. 3:5 But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unjust who inflicts wrath? (I speak as a man.)

6 Certainly not! For then how will God judge the world?

7 For if the truth of God has increased through my lie to His glory, why am I also still judged as a sinner?

2

Rom. 3:8 And why not say, "Let us do evil that good may come"?—as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say. Their condemnation is just.

9 What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin.

20 Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

3

3:2 to them [the Jews] were committed the oracles of God

- The *oracles* are the special revelation of God in the form of the Scriptures
- But a fuller description is much deeper and more complex and involves a mystery
- Title of the message: *The Mystery of the Oracles*

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Key facts for interpreting Romans:

1. Paul is writing to BELIEVERS – both Jews and Gentiles
2. The GOSPEL he proclaims (1:16-17) is the good news that those who are producing faith-filled works of righteousness are being justified in God's eyes and will be rewarded with kingdom inheritance
3. The SALVATION he offers is, therefore, the saving of the soul, which results in a good verdict at the JSC (see Matt. 16:24-27)

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Key facts for interpreting Romans:

4. His ultimate goal is to dispel the disunity and division in the church that have been spurred on by ethnic prejudices and carnality
5. To that end, Paul rebukes both groups of believers for sinning:
 - a. The Gentiles – for succumbing to the more obvious outward sins of the Greco-Roman culture (e.g., immorality and debased forms of licentious living)

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Key facts for interpreting Romans:

5. Paul rebukes both groups of believers (cont'd):

- b. The Jews – for observing the letter of the law outwardly, while ignoring the spirit of the law inwardly, by committing sins of the heart (e.g., bitterness, hatred, lust, pride, strife, etc.)
- c. The Jews – for clinging to the ritual aspects of the law, thinking their physical circumcision guarantees covenant acceptance, even though God is focused on circumcision of the heart

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Arguments Paul Anticipates from the Jewish Believers

1. What good is “Jewishness?”

Rom 3:1 What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision?

- The Jews want to know: “If circumcision is only profitable when we are keeping the law, then what’s the benefit of being Jewish and becoming circumcised?”
- Surely in their minds is also Paul’s shocking comment that when uncircumcised Gentiles keep the righteous requirements of the law, God views them *as if* they were circumcised

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- Haven’t they missed the point?
- They are arguing that Jewishness and circumcision are worthless if those things don’t keep them in covenant favor with God
- The point is that they should stop sinning, for their inward lawbreaking and mere observance of rituals while ignoring the righteous requirements of the law has essentially nullified God’s covenant acceptance of them
- Paul is implying: “The covenant is *conditional* – contingent on your obedience – which God made clear to you at Mt. Sinai.”

9

Exod 19:5-6a Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Exod 19:8a Then all the people answered together and said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do.”

- It seems Paul’s audience has forgotten that the covenant is *conditional* – dependent on their obedience

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- God expects His law to be fulfilled consistently, though not perfectly – which is why He gave them the sacrifices, so they could seek forgiveness (the OT equivalent of 1 Jn. 1:9 for NT believers)
- The law is not to be willfully and presumptuously disobeyed!
- Thus, Paul is not discounting the covenant itself; he is admonishing their “covenant presumption” which is the OT equivalent of Christians continuing in sin on the presumption of God’s grace in the NT (Rom. 6:1ff)

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- They’re probably expecting Paul to say, “There is now no advantage to being Jewish, seeing that Christ has come.” – but that is NOT what he says

3:1 What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision?

3:2 Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God.

Are there advantages to being God’s chosen people?

- **ABSOLUTELY!** The main advantage is that God entrusted Israel with the oracles of God

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- Per the Oxford English Dictionary: an oracle is “a priest or priestess acting as a medium through whom advice or prophecy was sought from the gods in classical antiquity”
- The Jewish people were God’s oracles to the nations, in the sense that they were God’s priests, who had been given the revelation of God, the Holy Scriptures, for the whole world
- God gave to Israel the law and the prophets, and WE have benefitted from the Scriptures, even in the 21st century! That is true for all cultures in every era of time

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Commentator James Dunn:

For a gentile readership the word “oracle” would evoke the thought of inspired utterances preserved from the past, often mysterious and puzzling in character, awaiting some key to unlock their meaning. Paul may well imply then that the Jews had been entrusted with the stewardship of safeguarding and preserving these oracles of God until the coming of the key, that is, the gospel of Christ Jesus, which unlocked the mystery of what had always been God’s purpose but which had remained hidden hitherto until this time of the End (cf 11:25–27; 16:25–26).

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Rom 16:25-26 Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith—
Why does Paul use the term “my gospel?” In what sense was it “his?”

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- Chitwood believes this is the gospel of kingdom inheritance given to Paul by Jesus, when Paul spent three years in Arabia
- He was commissioned to share this gospel with the Gentiles, so that the Holy Spirit could use it to call out sons to glory, those who will reign with Jesus as His bride and co-rulers
- It was this particular gospel that the prophets were curious about and which the angels desire to look into, for it results in the deposing of the angelic realm as rulers and the elevation of sons to glory as rulers in their place

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1 Pet 1:7-9 That the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls.

- This GOSPEL is about the SALVATION of the soul – resulting in inheritance for persevering in the Christian life

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1 Pet 1:10-11 Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.

12 To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things which angels desire to look into.

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- The ORACLES – in a general sense – are the law & prophets given to Israel, its custodians
- The ORACLES – in a specific sense – are the MYSTERY of Jews and Gentiles as one “in Christ” – Christians – to whom is extended the GOSPEL of kingdom inheritance
- Those who believe this gospel and produce faith-filled works of righteous will experience the SALVATION of their souls at the JSC
- What about those Jews who do not embrace Paul’s Gospel?

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Arguments Paul Anticipates from the Jewish Believers

2. Is God’s faithfulness nullified by Israel’s faithlessness?
- Rom 3:3 For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect?
- A predominant segment of the Jews – in fact, the nation overall – did not embrace Jesus as Messiah

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- Consequently, despite Paul sharing his gospel of kingdom inheritance with individual Jewish believers, Israel as a nation failed in its mission to steward the oracles
- That is, Israel failed to embrace and proclaim the MYSTERY of being “in Christ” and the glories of kingdom inheritance for those who qualify
- Paul was carrying the torch, but national Israel was not!

21

Commentator James Dunn:

They had failed God’s trust: either because having preserved the oracles of God for so many generations they had now failed to recognize the real meaning of them as given by the gospel; or because they had never recognized the real meaning in the first place, and in discharging their responsibility to the Gentiles as they saw it (2:19–20), they were presenting and living by a misconception of their covenant and the law (2:21–29).

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- Does national Israel’s faithlessness nullify God’s faithfulness?
- Furthermore, does the failure of individual Jewish believers to live righteously and proclaim the gospel of kingdom inheritance destroy God’s plan?
- Has His covenant been in vain? Should He ditch Israel and start over?

Rom 3:4 Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar. As it is written: “That You may be justified in Your words, and may overcome when You are judged.” (quoting Ps. 51:4)

23

Dunn: God’s faithfulness is not determined by Jewish unfaithfulness. As God remained faithful to his covenant with Israel in the past, despite Israel’s unfaithfulness, so he will remain faithful to Israel in the present and future, despite Israel’s continuing unfaithfulness in rejecting the gospel. Paul cannot allow that Israel’s unfaithfulness has nullified God’s choice of Israel ... for the simple reason that such an admission would undermine his own gospel; such is the continuity between God’s purpose for Israel and the gospel of his Son.

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Arguments Paul Anticipates from the Jewish Believers

- 3. If God remains faithful in spite of Israel's faithlessness, then wouldn't it be contrary to His nature to judge sin?**
- The argument suggests that when Israel is sinning and living in unbelief, God's righteousness shines all the more
 - In other words, His faithfulness and goodness are put on display, so why then would He condemn His people?
 - Wouldn't that be tantamount to opposing His own righteousness toward them?

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- Paul uses this argument to underscore Israel's presumption and irrationality in claiming they deserve God's favor because they are circumcised (in spite of sinning)
- The Israelites don't make any sense
- They think that God maintaining a righteous, faithful image means He will not judge them
- Of course, that is complete nonsense, which Paul makes clear in v. 6

Rom 3:6 Certainly not! For then how will God judge the world?

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- If Israel insists on using that outlandish argument, then the whole world can use it
- Incidentally, this is the argument essentially used by most evangelicals when they claim that God doesn't judge His children because they are "in Christ" and, therefore, have His positional righteousness (the Reformation doctrine of justification)
- Many claim, "God won't judge us for our SINS; He will judge us for our WORKS."
- That's a nonsensical argument

27

- Your **WORKS** are your **DEEDS** – what you do, how you live your life
- Your life is characterized, either by deeds of fleshliness and sinning ("works of the flesh" – Gal. 5) or deeds of Spirit-led fruitfulness
- Your works (deeds) are either "good and faithful" or "wicked and slothful"
- Most Christians can't fathom the idea of being judged for a lifetime of sinning at the JSC
- They think all their sins are covered and, therefore, they have nothing to worry about

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- They don't believe there is such a thing as negative reward, and they think any tears shed at the JSC will be wiped away (Rev. 21 – which applies to the New Earth, NOT the Millennium)
- They expect to be rewarded in some degree, even if their life has been characterized by what the Scriptures define as carnality
- That way of thinking is completely contrary to Christ's warning about the need for one's soul to be saved at the JSC (Matt. 16:24-27)

29

- Thus, the argument used by these Israelites is the **SAME** argument used by most Christians today, and it goes like this:
 - God can't judge us for sinning, because He is righteous, and we have His righteousness; His favor has been bestowed upon us
 - It would be unjust for God to judge His children and exclude us from the kingdom
- That thinking pervades modern evangelical Christianity

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- First century *Jewish* presumption has become 21st century *Christian* presumption
- But if God doesn't judge His own children for sinning, then how can He judge the world for sinning?
- Peter says that judgment **BEGINS** at the house of God (1 Pet. 4:17)

2 Cor 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

31

Dunn: The world we inhabit is a morally ordered world; man's sense of being morally responsible, whether in terms of gentile conscience or of Jewish law, simply confirms the revelatory postulate that there will be a final day of reckoning at which God will provide and "render to each according to his works" (2:6).

32

Paul repackages this argument in vs. 7-8:

Rom 3:7 For if the truth of God has increased through my lie to His glory, why am I also still judged as a sinner?

8 And why not say, "Let us do evil that good may come?"—as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say. Their condemnation (judgment) is just.

- This problem just doesn't want to go away

33

- The Jewish believers continue to think they can sin with impunity, because of God's faithfulness to His covenant people, and many NT-era children of God think the same
- In fact, some of the believers (probably the Gentiles) had charged Paul with teaching that the Jews could sin with immunity, because they were God's chosen ones
- Paul makes clear that those rumors are slanderous; he has never taught this, and he is confident those who have spread these lies will be judged by God

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- God continues to be faithful to each one of His children, despite our sinning and unbelief
- But God's faithfulness does not mean He closes a blind eye to sin
- Judgment day is coming for ALL – for Israel, for Jews and Gentiles who are "in Christ," and even for the unregenerate world
- So don't go on thinking you can sin with immunity, because God is true and righteous
- God is faithful, but that doesn't give His children license to sin – neither Jews nor Gentiles

35

Rom 3:9 What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin.

- Keep in mind that Paul is talking to believers
- So his point in vs. 9-18 is NOT that the whole world is sinful
- His audience already knows that, and while the verses in the next section certainly apply to the whole world, that is not Paul's focus
- He applies the unified thought of vs. 9-18 to Jewish and Gentile BELIEVERS

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- As if to say: the GOSPEL of kingdom inheritance is to Jewish believers first, but also to Gentile believers
- When embraced, it results in SALVATION of the soul, and the reward of age-lasting life and glory and honor and peace and incorruption (2:7, 10)
- In 3:10-18 Paul indicts both Jews & Gentiles:
Rom 3:10-11 As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God.

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Rom 3:12 They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one."

13-14 Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.

15-17 Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known.

18 There is no fear of God before their eyes."

38

- Paul starts the string of quotations from Eccles., then gives several passages from the Psalms and a final lengthy one from Isa. 59
Dunn: The message is clear ... no one within the law can claim to be righteous either because he is within the law or because (he thinks) he keeps the law. Paul's adaptation of the quotation re-emphasizes the point: "There is none righteous, not even one." The later, larger quotation from Isa 59:7-8 (vv 15-17) makes the same point: this is Israel being challenged from within its own scriptures for its own lawlessness and lack of righteousness.

39

- Paul's purpose is to indict the Jewish believers who continue to think they are favored by God and are largely exempt from His judgment because of their status as God's covenant people and their identification with the covenant via the mark of circumcision
- Consequently, they continue in their condescension toward the Gentiles
- So Paul demonstrates from their own Scriptures that they are just as culpable of sinfulness as the Gentiles

40

- He asks in v. 9, "Are WE (Jews) better than THEY (Gentiles)?"
- The answer is a resounding NO! In fact, all are under sin
- Dunn concludes that Paul is referring to the POWER of sin – and I would agree – since Christ has already paid the PENALTY of sin for all mankind

41

Dunn: The prepositional formula "under sin" (as in 7:14 and Gal 3:22) and the personification subsequently (most clearly 5:12, 21; 6:6, 12-23; 7:8-11) indicate that Paul understands "sin" as a force (or power) within the world, which functions in and upon man to negative effect ... The strength of the imagery of kingly rule or slave ownership (5:21; 6:12-23; 7:14) should not be discounted, since evidently this power can exercise a force majeure [i.e., major force] which results in death (5:21; 6:16, 21, 23; 7:9, 11).

42

- Dunn also refers to a commentator named Kaye, who concludes that “*hamartia* [the Greek word for sin] consistently in Romans means “sinful act, or the guilt consequent upon such acts.”
- So that would add weight to the view that Paul is referring, NOT to the PENALTY of sin, but to the POWER of sin upon all men
- Paul’s point to the Jewish believers is that ALL are under the POWER of sinning, both Jewish and Gentile believers

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The resounding point:

Rom 3:19 Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.

- The Jews are the ones under the law, so Paul says to the Jewish believers, “You are just as culpable and guilty of sinning as the Gentile believers.”
- Your own law indicts you!

44

The final blow:

Rom 3:20 Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

- Dunn refers to this as the “theological underpinning of the whole argument”
- Paul says something very similar in Galatians: Gal 2:16 Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law ... for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.
- In the context of Galatians, Paul is rebuking Peter for not eating with the Gentiles

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- In the context of Romans 1-3, what are “deeds of the law?”
- Are they the fulfilling of the righteous requirements of the law, that is, keeping the moral law of God? the law of Christ? the law of liberty? the royal law? the law of love?
- NO! Deeds (works) of the law are one and the same as keeping the ritual aspects of the law – Paul’s showcase illustration here in Romans is circumcision
- In Galatians it is dietary laws, and in Colossians it is observance of feasts and sabbaths

46

- Paul is emphasizing that NO ONE can be declared righteous merely by keeping the ritual deeds of the Mosaic law
- Incidentally, Paul is not talking about matters of initial salvation, or regeneration
- He is talking to believers about matters of sanctification – living righteously, set apart unto God

47

Dunn: “by works of the law” ... This is the first appearance of a key phrase whose importance for understanding Paul’s thought in this letter can hardly be overemphasized, but which has in fact frequently been misunderstood by successive generations of commentators. How did Paul intend his Roman readership to understand it? ... Given ... Paul’s polemic against Jewish over-confidence based on having the law, the answer is not difficult. “Works of the law” must refer to the attitude attacked in chap. 2; it must denote the “works” referred to there, particularly circumcision ...

48

Dunn: “works of the law” are not the same as doing the law (2:13–14), or fulfilling the law (2:27); “works of the law” are not the same as “the work of the law written in the heart” (2:15), “the circumcision of heart by the Spirit” (2:29). “Works of the law” are rather something more superficial, at the level of “the letter” (2:27, 29), an outward mark indicative of ethnic solidarity (2:28), something more limited than “patient perseverance in good work” (2:7). In the context of the argument in 2:1–3:8 then, “works of the law” can be defined somewhat crudely as doing what is necessary to be (become or remain) within the covenant.

49

- By warning the Jewish believers that mere works (deeds) of the law will not result in God declaring them righteous, Paul has essentially taken a giant pin and deflated the balloon of Jewish ego
- The Jewish believers at Rome can no longer think they are better than the Greco-Roman believers merely because they are God’s chosen people who are circumcised
- Keeping the Jewish rituals cannot make a person righteous

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- The practical application for 21st century believers:
- Keeping a list of rules will not sanctify you
- God wants inward obedience from a circumcised heart
- He wants you to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law BY FAITH – which we will see in our next study
- That is what Paul’s GOSPEL is all about – the MYSTERY of the oracles

51

- Paul later says, “whatever is not from faith is sin” (14:23)
- He also says, “love is the fulfillment of the law” (13:10)
- Christians who merely keep a list – expecting a daily ritual of devotions to sanctify or holding to certain separational “standards” that presumably make them spiritual – are some of the most condescending, unloving people
- They tend to take on the role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of others, which gets messy

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- But if we love others as Jesus loves us, we will truly be fulfilling the righteous requirements of the law
- The Christian life begins with grace – “for by grace you have been saved, through faith” (Eph. 2:8-9)
- And it continues by grace – “being justified freely by His grace” (3:24)
- Faith is the means by which we access God’s grace – “we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand” (5:2)

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- The Holy Spirit is the catalyst – “that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” (8:4)

54

- Many years ago I sought to understand why God would command Israel through the Mosaic law to keep so many rituals ...
- All those restrictive ordinances governing their diet ...
- And laws specifying what would make them unclean and how they could become clean again ...
- Regulations for handling leprosy ...
- Requirements for observing certain holy days and for making restitution ...

55

- Strange edicts (in my way of thinking) about not mixing fabrics and not cooking a young goat in the milk of its mother – on and on these laws continue – 613 laws in total!
- And of course, circumcision, which was the capstone of all the laws, marking their identification with Jehovah and His law
- What was God’s purpose in all this?
- Was God trying to overload His people with rules and regulations?
- Not at all!

56

- When I preached through the Pentateuch, I came to realize that the intent of each of the rituals was to point their attention to one of the ten commandments, God’s moral laws
- In other words, each ritual served a bigger purpose, and the purpose was twofold:
- First, to serve as an outward, daily reminder of their need to live holy and righteous, by obeying God’s MORAL laws
- Second, to alert them to their constant failure to live righteously and thus, their need to offer sacrifices to seek forgiveness

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- So the rituals were designed with a lofty purpose in mind: to keep Israel focused on obeying God’s MORAL laws
- The problem was that through the centuries – and especially during the era of the Pharisees – the RITUALS supplanted the MORAL laws
- Israel focused on the rituals at the expense of the deeper moral meaning behind them
- But the purpose of the Jewish rituals is to bring knowledge of sin (end of v. 20)

58

- Ironically, the Jews boasted in their keeping of the rituals, but the rituals were designed to deflate the Jews, to cause them to see their inability to keep the law and thus their need for God’s grace!
- Sadly, the Jews leaned on the rituals as a crutch of sorts, thinking that by the deeds (works) of the law they were in favor with God, though they were disobeying God inwardly, committing the “heart sins” listed in Romans 1:18-32

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- That is the serious spiritual problem Paul is dealing with in Romans as he confronts the Jewish believers
- Ritual observance is part of their psyche, because of the influence of the Pharisees
- 21st century fundamentalist Christians must come to realize that ritual observance in modernized forms is also part of their psyche, for that is what they have been taught all their lives

60

- **By God's grace we need to cast off our ritualism and the thinking that it makes us spiritual, and learn to walk in the Spirit, thereby fulfilling the righteous requirements of the law**