

Daily Bread with Brother Hwa-Chi (Not reviewed by the speaker, for personal use only)

Romans 2: 28-29

Brothers and sisters, peace be with you, this is Hwa-Chi. Thank the Lord, it's time to read the bible again. Today, we will continue reading Romans chapter 2, verses 28 and 29.

Yesterday we read Paul's discourse on circumcision, directly pointing out that circumcision is merely a physical sign. If one is circumcised yet still transgresses the law, that circumcision is not counted as circumcision. The true meaning of circumcision is to cut off the flesh, and a person who cuts off the flesh can keep the whole law. If it remains only a physical sign but cannot help restrain the flesh, that sign has no value.

God raised Paul as an apostle to the Gentiles. He established many churches in Gentile lands, which were constantly disturbed by Jews. In Acts 15:1-2, "Certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, and it was decided that Paul, Barnabas, and some others should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this question." These Jews claimed that believing in Jesus was not enough; one must also receive Old Testament circumcision, which completely distorted the truth of the New Testament.

We thank the Lord for Paul, who boldly stood for the truth and went to the Jerusalem church to debate with the apostles and elders. After detailed discussion, they concluded that Gentile believers need not be circumcised. If not for Paul's steadfast adherence to the truth, the New Testament church might have gradually become a branch of Judaism. We thank God for Paul's courage, a faithful apostle. In Acts 15, the truth was clarified, but the trouble of requiring New Testament churches to observe Jewish rituals never ceased. Here we see that truth is one thing, but whether one can uphold it is another.

Throughout Paul's ministry, circumcision and dietary laws continually troubled the churches he served, causing him much distress. Thus, in many of his epistles, he addressed these issues. If we carefully read Paul's letters, we find his understanding of the truth consistent from beginning to end. However, in practice, Paul was flexible; over time, his practices became increasingly absolute.

For example, in an earlier epistle like 1 Corinthians 9:20, Paul says, "To the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law." Paul hoped to win more Jews to Christ, so he became like a Jew to them.

Romans, a more ultimate epistle, advances Paul's stance in today's passage, stating that being a Jew outwardly is not true Jewish. In his later prison epistles, Paul's discourse grows stronger. In Colossians 3:11, "Here there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all." By the prison epistles, Paul no longer distinguishes between Jew and Gentile; all are new creations in Christ. Thus, we must learn Paul's steadfastness in truth, uncompromising, yet also his inclusiveness and flexibility in practice, adjusting to the church's needs.

The Roman church was predominantly Gentile but included many Jews. When Paul wrote Romans, he had not yet visited Rome, allowing him to expound the truth impartially, stating that an outward Jew is not a true Jew; only the inward is. Years after writing Romans, Paul arrived in Rome in chains. He met local Jews, preached the gospel, and testified using Moses and the prophets. Some believed, but most did not.

Finally, Paul quoted Isaiah in Acts 28:26-29, "He said, 'Go to this people and say: "Hearing you will hear, and shall not understand; and seeing you will see, and not perceive; for the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their heart and turn, and I should heal them. Therefore, let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!" After Paul spoke, the Jews left,

greatly disputing. This shows that when Paul wrote the prison epistles in Rome, he emphasized in church practice that there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile; all are new creations in Christ.

In condemning the Jews, Paul reached a crucial conclusion, redefining true Jewish and true circumcision. He used a simple, direct perspective: what is done outwardly is not true; what is done inwardly is. Let us read today's passage to understand Paul's definition of true Jewish and true circumcision, then add an application for New Testament saints today. Let's read verse 28.

Verse 28: "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh."

Paul previously noted that Jews boasted in their circumcision yet transgressed the law, acting in the flesh. This was contrary to God's original intent in establishing circumcision with Abraham. Paul says their circumcision is not counted as circumcision. Here, he explains why: an outward Jew is not a true Jew. Being an outward Jew means observing all Jewish rituals externally, like Sabbath or dietary laws. Outwardly, they appear as law-abiding Jews, but Paul boldly declares this is not true Jewishness.

After Judah's exile, Jews were scattered among the nations. By strictly observing ritual laws, they avoided assimilation, maintaining a pure Jewish society upon returning to Jerusalem. This allowed the prophecy of a virgin bearing a son to be fulfilled, bringing Jesus Christ's birth. These ritual laws served their purpose.

All Old Testament ritual laws pointed to Jesus Christ as their foreshadowing. Since Christ came, fulfilling the foreshadowing, they are replaced by Him. Thus, based on God's revelation, Paul boldly declares: an outward Jew is not a Jew, nor is outward physical circumcision true circumcision. Paul, a Jew himself, had deep affection for his people. He urged Jews to recognize that with the New Testament, they should not cling to ritual laws or boast in physical circumcision, as these are outward signs that cannot bring real change.

Verse 29: “But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.”

Only one who is inwardly a Jew is a true Jew, for God does not look at outward appearance but at the heart. God’s purpose in choosing the Jews is clear in Exodus 19:4-6, “‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself. 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; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.” God desired Jews to obey His voice, keep His covenant, be a priestly kingdom to worship Him, and live as a holy nation, bearing a beautiful testimony.

In the Old Testament, Jews followed God outwardly, often becoming stiff-necked and disciplined by God. Now, with Jesus Christ and the New Testament, all who believe in Him have the Holy Spirit indwelling, enabling them to follow God inwardly. True worship flows from within, and inward transformation makes one holy—not through outward rituals but inward reality. This is the true Jew.

True circumcision is also of the heart, removing fleshly lusts to make one holy. Cutting off a piece of skin cannot achieve holiness. Paul says true circumcision is in the Spirit, not the letter. The Chinese Union Version’s translation is poetic but vague, leaving “in the Spirit” unclear. The English translation is direct: in the Spirit and not in the letter. Outward circumcision follows the letter of the law, performed on the eighth day for Jewish male infants. Paul says this is circumcision in the letter, not true circumcision. True circumcision is inward, of the heart, in the Spirit—circumcision of the heart. What is this? With the Holy Spirit’s indwelling, He performs a spiritual surgery on the heart, removing evil desires. This is truly cutting off the flesh.

Sadly, evil desires in the heart are like cancer; even after removal, they regrow, as their source is the flesh. As long as one lives, the flesh continually produces evil desires. Thus, spiritual circumcision is not a one-time act but ongoing. Every saint has moments of victory and weakness. By maintaining a clear conscience, allowing

the Holy Spirit's supply to reach the heart, one grows in holiness daily—this is true circumcision. Such a life earns praise from God, not men. Physical signs may earn human praise but cannot remove the flesh.

God values true circumcision: through the Holy Spirit's help, fighting the flesh and gradually removing evil desires. Galatians 5:16-18 says, "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." By walking in the Spirit, we overcome the flesh and gain God's praise.

Summarizing verses 28-29, we can compare Jews and true Jews in a table: Jews have outward religion; true Jews have inward reality. Jews rely on the law outwardly; true Jews have the law written on their hearts. Jews teach the law outwardly; true Jews follow the Spirit, living lawfully. Jews boast in the law; true Jews boast in God. Jews know God's will; true Jews live by it. Jews are circumcised physically; true Jews are circumcised in the heart. Jews receive human praise; true Jews receive God's praise.

Having finished this week's passage, we need a balanced understanding of Paul's condemnation of the Jews and apply it to ourselves. Most saints today are not Jews, so what attitude should we take toward them? First, recognize that Paul's condemnation was not out of anger for their disturbance of his churches. On the contrary, his love for his people drove his fear that they would cling to their Old Testament identity and miss the richer New Testament grace.

In Romans 9:1-4, Paul confesses, "I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises." This reveals Paul's motive and heart. He longed for all Jews to become true Jews—believing in Jesus Christ, becoming New Testament saints with the indwelling Holy Spirit, surpassing outward Jewishness.

Yet, most Jews hardened their hearts, refusing to repent. Does this mean God abandoned them? Some Christians believe so, developing replacement theology, claiming Christians fully replaced Jews, who completed their historical role and are no longer remembered by God. During the Reformation, this was mainstream, held by Martin Luther and Calvin.

In the age of grace, few Jews believe in Jesus, making it seem God abandoned them. Pushing this theology to extremes can lead to disaster, as seen in World War II, when German churches largely stood by during the Holocaust. Replacement theology's errors were exploited by malicious politicians, leading to tragic outcomes.

Jews are God's Old Testament chosen people. Though they broke His covenant, God remains faithful, keeping His covenant and showing mercy. God prepared special grace for them. Paul states clearly in Romans 11:25-26, "I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved." Paul assures that at Christ's return, all remaining Israel will be saved. God has not abandoned the Jews. How God deals with them will be explored further in Romans 9–11.

New Testament saints are true Jews. We should not condemn Jews—that is God's matter. But we must apply Paul's words to ourselves, asking: Are we true or nominal Christians? Paul's criterion is clear: outward is not true; inward is. Being a Christian is not defined by outward religious activities. Some think baptism, regular church attendance, occasional giving, supporting certain parties, or opposing certain policies makes a good Christian. Paul would say: Outward things do not make us holy. We must follow the Spirit inwardly, grow spiritually through daily Bible reading, live virtuously, serve with fellow saints, build the church, and be Christ's testimony on earth. This is a true Christian.

Let us pray together: Lord, thank You! Through Paul's exposition, we see what a true Jew and true circumcision are. Today, we ask You to give us the ability to practice this, to examine our lives and see if we are true Christians. Help me establish a daily Bible-reading habit, with time for devotion, enjoying Your supply in Your Word. By Your grace, let my life grow, living virtuously. Bless my church, that saints may love one another, so seekers among us say, "God is truly among you." This is a life pleasing to You. Bless my church. We pray in the holy name of Jesus Christ.