

ROMANS

THE CHRISTIAN'S CONSTITUTION

STUDY SEVEN

The Dark Side of Being Super-Religious

Romans 2:17–29

It is the greatest heresy known on earth that if I could somehow work hard enough and long enough, I might somehow please God who has made me. The fact is you can't. You can't run on the treadmill fast enough or lift yourself high enough to win God's favor. You see, that's where grace comes in so beautifully.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

ONLY on a treadmill can a person walk or run for hours and go nowhere. This workout machine allows us to move our legs, exert physical strength, sweat profusely . . . while staying in the same place! On the treadmill, *no one* goes anywhere—not even proud fitness instructors who coax us to do more, become better, or try harder.

In Romans, Paul has been arguing that we are all sinners in need of a savior. Trying to earn our way to heaven is like running on a religious treadmill—*forever exerting effort but going nowhere*. As Pastor Chuck Swindoll writes,

No amount of effort on the treadmill will put distance between us and our sin, nor will religious effort bring us any closer to God. Only the grace of God will do that.¹

Being born in a Christian home, knowing Scripture to the point of teaching others, belonging to a special religious group—none of those privileges exempts us from the need of salvation through Jesus Christ.

In this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study, Paul spotlights the religious legalists—the Jews. They are the *super-religious*. Surely, by keeping God's Law, they have achieved spiritual perfection and first place. But no. On the treadmill of religion, even the fittest of humanity falls short of God's standards. *We all need God's undeserved favor!*



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PREPARE YOUR HEART

Open up and tell God what's on your mind. Show Him all the areas where you need His urgent help. Echo David's prayer in Psalm 139:23–24.

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
Point out anything in me that offends you
and lead me along the path of everlasting life.*

Now, make known to Him your heart's plea.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Context helps us discern where our passage sits in the scriptural account of God's plan of redemption.² God sent His Son to save the world through the line of Abraham. In His covenant with Abraham, God promised to make Abraham a great nation, bless all the nations through him, and give his descendants the land of Canaan ([Genesis 12:1–9; 15](#)).

Then as a sign of the covenant, God told Abraham and his descendants to circumcise their male children. "Your bodies will bear the mark of my everlasting covenant," God said (17:13). Abraham's descendants grew into a mighty nation, Israel, which was the new name that God gave Jacob, Abraham's grandson ([32:24–32](#)). The title, *Jew*, is a derivation of *Judah*, one of Jacob's twelve sons, and it means "Yahweh be praised."

God chose the Jews for this role, not because of their size or merit but out of love and faithfulness to His covenant ([Deuteronomy 7:6–11](#)). God gave them special privileges: the Law ([Exodus 19:1–17](#)), a unique relationship with Him ([Leviticus 26:46](#)), and the knowledge of His will. He also gave them a weighty responsibility: to be His light to those in darkness ([Exodus 19:4–6; Romans 2:19–20; 9:4](#)).

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What spiritual reward do you think the Jews assumed was theirs because of their elevated status with God?



Observation: The Jew and the Law

In his book, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs*, Pastor Chuck asserts that correct interpretation of a biblical text hinges on thoughtful and detailed observation. So, carefully read [Romans 2:17–29](#) more than once to absorb Paul's words. Note your initial observations. In particular, note the number of times Paul says, "you," referring to Jews.

Look a little closer at [2:17–20](#). How would you summarize Paul's descriptions? Remember, Paul was also Jewish, so he's reflecting on his own experience.

What questions did Paul ask his Jewish readers in [2:21–24](#)? What main problem or sin do these verses expose? This was Paul's problem, too, before he came to Christ!

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What did Paul say is the value of circumcision in [Romans 2:25–27](#)? What were his remarks concerning the person who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the Law? What shocking impact would his Jewish readers have felt?

According to [Romans 2:28–29](#), what is the heart of the issue?

No outward act is going to in any way ingratiate you to God. Circumcision is simply a mark that's supposed to reveal the truth, but it alone isn't the truth. It's like a wedding band, which represents fidelity. But a wedding band doesn't keep a person faithful. It's what's on the inside that matters.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Those who teach the Law but do not keep the spirit of the Law display hypocrisy. A true Jew is not defined by outward identity but by *an inward circumcision of the heart!*



Interpretation: Outward Religion

Now, discover the meaning of the passage by digging deeper. Paul spoke to “you who call yourselves Jews” in [Romans 2:17–18](#). Explore the term [Jew](#) in the *Holman Bible Dictionary* at studylight.org or the Bible dictionary of your choice. Why would Paul’s Jewish readers take pride in the privileges God had given them?

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Think of what that could do to you if you are born a Jew, if you are taught as a Jew, and if you are reared by Jewish parents. There is a sense of pride and tradition that becomes a part of your life. And the tradition replaces an inner relationship with the living God. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

In [Romans 2:21–24](#), Paul questioned the hypocrisy of those who teach the law of Moses and yet break it. Explore the term [hypocrisy](#) in the *Holman Bible Dictionary* at studylight.org. Explain the significance of this passage as if talking to a friend.

Look at [2:25–27](#) again carefully in the NET and the J. B. Phillips translations. Then find the meaning of the term [circumcision](#) in the *Holman Bible Dictionary* at studylight.org. What meaning was Paul conveying in these three verses?

Reflect on what you have read and record a few principles that stand out to you from this passage.

Religion that's outward is only a curse. It's a blinding curse. It thickens the heart. It dulls the senses. It substitutes ritual for reality. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Even the most religious have a dark side hidden behind a mask of piety. Religion keeps us running faster, working harder, and doing more, hoping our efforts bridge the sin-gap between us and God. By putting our faith in Christ, we step off the treadmill and kneel before the cross, where the work of our salvation has been accomplished. “It’s done!” our Savior declares. And then, we receive the Holy Spirit—the agent of inward transformation who puts us on a path to true godliness.

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Correlation: Religion versus Inward Transformation

Now, correlate *Romans 2:17–29* with *Micah 6:1–8* and see how the whole truth begins to emerge—that God does not delight in religion devoid of inward sincerity or transformation. According to these passages, what does God require of humankind?

Compare *Romans 2:17–29* to *Philippians 3:1–11*. What can you learn from these passages about true circumcision? In light of Christ, how did Paul consider these privileges that he had once thought valuable? How did his perspective change and why?

Why are the most religious unable to produce inward transformation on their own, according to *Romans 3:9–20; 8:1–4; and 10:1–4*? Because the law of Moses is powerless to save, how did God provide salvation? What was Paul's prayer for his fellow Jews?

If you've relied on yourself to get you from earth to heaven, you're in for a major stop along the way. A real surprise. "Jesus paid it all; All to Him I owe. Sin has left a crimson stain; Christ washed it white as snow." That's for the gentile. That's for the Jew. That's for the blatant sinner. That's for the religious traditionalist. That's for you. That's for me. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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Application: Choose to Have a Relationship with Christ!

The last step of the *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method is application. During this step, make sure that you respond to the good news. Write down whom you are relying on to get you from earth to heaven. If you could share with a religious friend, who is legalistic and proud, the only way to God—the only One who can produce in us inward transformation—what would you say?

If you've been huffing and puffing on the treadmill of religious rituals, it's time to step off and rest in God's grace, in the salvation that was won for you on the cross. Then, invite God to infuse your life with His grace. Let the Holy Spirit reveal any area in your life that needs His transforming touch. What new life does the Spirit desire to produce in you?

Christ came that He might do the work of our salvation, and it's completed. It's done, finished, paid in full. And you have it available to you as a gift.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



A FINAL PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank You for piercing through the depths of my heart with Your Word—showing me that the treadmill of good works never gets anyone Your smile of acceptance. Thank You for the precious gift of Your Son. And because You're well pleased with Him, You're well pleased with me. Make me like that tax-collector who simply needed Your mercy to continue to live! Make me humble, authentic, and kind. Use my life to draw people to Christ. In His name, I pray. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary: Insights on Romans* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2015), 55.
2. To learn more about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, go to the web page, "[How Does Pastor Chuck Swindoll Study the Bible?](#)"

For the 2025 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study was developed by Mirlenda Noëlliste in collaboration with Aaron Massey, senior vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, and Bryce Klabunde, vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages. Copyright © 2006, 2025 by Charles R. Swindoll, Inc. All rights are reserved worldwide. Duplication of copyrighted material for commercial use is strictly prohibited.

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