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Romans

Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God,
Romans 2:17

Paul now names the people he's been directing his thoughts to since verse 2:1, the Jews. He has laid out his argument concisely concerning the nature of judgment for those with the law and those without the law. Now he gives three points which concern the Jew's attitude.

- 1) You are called a Jew. The term Jew is applied as a general name for the people of Israel. Abraham was a Hebrew and the name was applied to those of the line of promise even to Paul's time (Philippians 3:5). However, the people are also called "Israelites." This is the group and nation of the people. But even this was further refined to "Jew." The term comes from the tribe of Judah, of whom Jesus descends. Judah became the prominent tribe of the people of Israel and after the Babylonian exile, the term Jew became synonymous with any person from any of the tribes of Israel. Being called a Jew was considered an honor because they were the stewards of God's oracles and his chosen people.
- 2) You "rest on the law." Just as some people "rest on Catholicism" or "rest on their good works" or "rest on their blessings as evidence of God's favor" the Jews rested on having the law. It became an end in and of itself. "Not only are we God's chosen, but we have the law and thus are in right standing with God."

3) You "make your boast in God." The one true God revealed Himself through the promised line which eventually became the Jews. They had His law and His name rests on them - Israel means "He struggles with God." Not only did God place the name "El" on them, but He also revealed His other names - "I AM," "Jehovah," "El Shaddai," and etc. They could boast that this God, who has revealed Himself through their oracles and to their people, was surely on their side.

However, Paul has already shown that all men, both Jew and Gentile, need more than a name to be in favor with God. They also need more than the law to be in favor with God. And they need more than knowing God's name and character to be in His favor. James explains this quite well in his epistle. Note how he brings in all three points - Abraham being a Hebrew; works of faith rather than merely having knowledge; and having a correct knowledge of who God is and yet not being right with him -

"But someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works.' Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?" James 2:18-22

Life application: Again and again we see in Scripture that what God desires is faith. Our family, our denomination, or our nation of birth is irrelevant to a right standing with Him. Having a Bible in our house and even being a teacher of that Bible means nothing without faith in what it states. And knowing all about God in our heads means nothing if we don't have a relationship with Him. Let us strive to put aside all externals and focus on what is inside - a heart and attitude which demonstrates our love for Him.

...and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, Romans 2:18

There are two general meanings that the word "approve" could mean in this verse. The first would be "to approve of" and the other would be to "prove" or to "discern between." Either would make sense in the context of the verse and it should be noted that the former would merely be the result of exercising the latter. In the overall context and because one eventually results in the other, it would be logical that Paul is speaking of discernment.

This type of discernment is found in the testing of metals by fire. When they are heated they are proven pure, found to be mixed with lesser metals, or defiled by impurities. The fire reveals the purity, nature, and quality of the solid by breaking it down into liquid. Jesus uses this same term in Luke 12:56 in a manner revealing discernment -

"Hypocrites! You can discern the face of the sky and of the earth, but how is it you do not discern this time?" Luke 12:56

The people He was addressing could walk out from morning to morning and tell what the weather would be like by the color of the sky. But when the Light of the world came and revealed His glory, they were blinded and unable to make a right discernment about who He actually is.

In a like manner, Paul shows that the Jew, putting his trust in the law as an end in and of itself, boasts in God because they "know His will" from the law. This is done regardless of whether they actually have faith in God or not. They know what He expects from a mechanical sense and therefore can discern between what is good and what isn't. They obtain this because they are "being instructed out of the law."

The word "instructed" here is from the Greek word katechoumenos. It is where we obtain our word "catechumen" - one who is being instructed. From this comes the word catechism, or instruction.

The instruction they receive helps them to understand what is right, but he will show that it doesn't guarantee that the knowledge will be transferred to right action. As an example, a judge may know the law like the back of his hand, but this doesn't mean that he will actually obey the law that he knows. Time and time again we read of judges who are arrested for committing the very crimes that they judge others for. These judges -

- 1) Know the law (His will)
- 2) Agree with the law because they judge others using it (approve the things that are excellent)
- 3) Because they have been schooled in law (instructed out of the law)

All of this, however, is no guarantee of right living. We will see this as we continue.

Life application: What is your level of Bible knowledge? Have you read the word many times? Have you studied the original languages? Have you been schooled in proper theology? If yes - big deal... big deal if you don't align your life with what you know. Having the law; knowing the Bible; understanding the nature of God - none of that means diddly if you have no heart for the Lord. Each day, remember to return to child-like faith in your Lord. Then go back and apply the meat of His word to Your wholesome diet.

...and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, Romans 2:19

This is a continuation of the previous verse and will carry on through the next verse. The Jews rested in the law, made their boast in God, and knew His will.

They were able to discern what was right because of their instruction out of the law. Because of this, they were confident that they were a sufficient "guide to the blind" and were "a light to those who are in darkness." But the law is not an end in and of itself. It is only a means of understanding God's perfection and man's fallen state.

"Darkness" as used in the Bible often refers to a state of spiritual blindness and a life apart from God. When a person trusts that they can meet the demands of the law apart from a reliance on God's mercy, it only lead to self-blindness. This inevitably will result in leading others astray as well. Jesus shows time and again that this is exactly what happened to the leaders of Israel, such as is seen in Matthew 15:14 -

"Let them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch."

The light which is found in Scripture is only suitable for someone who is willing to use that light for self-illumination first. As the Psalmist implored, so should each person who desires to be instructed from God's word -

"Open my eyes, that I may see
Wondrous things from Your law." Psalm 119:18

The Jewish people had every assurance that they were the stewards of God's oracles and that through them would come all the riches of God's promises to the world, but this assurance merely led them to trust that they were somehow excused from God's wrath and judgment. The law to them became a manipulative tool which they used to lord their supposed superiority over the gentiles. However, because of their incorrect use and instruction of it, Jesus shows the opposite was the result -

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves." Matthew 23:15

The law never had the intent or purpose of making people perfect before God. As noted in a previous verse, the fact that the Day of Atonement was given as a part of the law proves this. What the law was meant to do was to lead the people to a humble walk before God in the eager expectation of the Messiah who would reveal the glory of God to the world. This was prophesied in the Old Testament and revealed in the New -

"The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light,
And upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death
Light has dawned." Matthew 4:16

Life application: When you read the Bible and see stories of people committing grievous sins, do you see yourself next to them or do you see them as more vile than you? Understand that erring in any part of the law breaks the entire law and therefore you are as guilty as they are. The judgment they received is the judgment you deserve. Take time today to thank God that your punishment was transferred to Jesus. It was a high cost paid for your sin.

...an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law. Romans 2:20

This is the final portion of the idea which began in verse 17. Those who rested in the law, the Jews, made their boast in God because they knew his will from the law. Because they were the law's stewards, they could make value judgments about what is morally right. This resulted in a confidence that they could guide the blind and illuminate the darkness of those without the law. This allowed them to become "an instructor of the foolish" and "a teacher of babes." They believed they were so qualified because they had "the form of knowledge and truth in the law."

In Scripture, the word "foolish" is normally associated with one of two types of people - the first is one who is uneducated in a matter and the second is someone who is morally deficient or wicked. In this verse, Paul is speaking of the first - someone lacking the form of knowledge and truth in the law.

The term "a teacher of babes" is the literal meaning of the words, but it symbolically means someone who is as ignorant about a matter as a baby. To the Jew, everyone else who lived without the law would fall into this category - "We know as adults; your knowledge is that of an infant." Paul, in 1 Corinthians 3:1, 2 uses terminology which reflects this type of understanding -

"And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal."

The same concept is expanded on by the author of Hebrews -

"For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil." Hebrews 5:12-14

Having seen this in real applications, we now turn to 1 Peter 2:1, 2. There we see that although solid food, which adults eat and which represents development in wisdom, is important, it is not the entire picture. Peter shows that the Bible is actually something meant for all, but is considered "pure milk." This is something for babes as well as adults -

"Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious." 1 Peter 2:1, 2

What is being conveyed is that the Bible is pure spiritual milk - acceptable to all people of all ages. But increased knowledge of it moves one from being a spiritual infant to a fully developed person. The problem Paul is addressing in these verses, and which will be explained in the verses to come, is that having all of the Bible knowledge in the world doesn't necessarily lead one to maturity. Only when it is properly applied and acted on does this occur. The Jews Paul speaks of had the knowledge to impart to others, but they didn't apply it to themselves.

The Geneva Bible states the situation this way, "As though he said that the Jews under a pretence of an outward serving of God, attributed all to themselves, when in reality they did nothing less than observe the Law." Mere observation of the law accomplishes nothing without an internal change in the person. Therefore, like Peter stated, the Jews - as all of us - need to "desire the pure milk of the word." By searching the purity of the law, we will naturally be led to a close and personal relationship with the Lawgiver, our glorious Lord.

Life application: Head knowledge is great and we need to increase our knowledge of the word every day. As we do, we become spiritually mature. However, we need to continually search out the intent behind the knowledge - a personal walk with Jesus. Let our hearts be aligned with our actions so that we will be pleasing vessels, ready for the Lord's use.