



Religiosity is No Excuse

Romans 2:17-24

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With our text this morning, being Romans 2:17-24, if you would please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word, for the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient. The Word of the Lord is completely authoritative, and the Word of the Lord is completely without error.

Romans, chapter 2, beginning at verse 17. "But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'"

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let us pray for his blessing upon it. Lord, we ask that you would use your Word this morning. That it would not just be something we hear and acknowledge, but it would take deep root in our hearts. That you would use it by the power of your Holy Spirit to make us more and more into the image of Christ. This we ask, in Christ's precious name, amen.

Perhaps the most effective criticism people make against the church is that it is a place filled with hypocrites. Maybe you have had this experience, you have tried to get a friend or a co-worker or a family member to come with you to church and they look at you and say, "Oh, I want no part of church. The church is just a bunch of hypocrites." I think there is a very real sense in which that is true, especially if you define a hypocrite as someone whoever does anything other than what God commands. If you're looking for a church that has no hypocrites in it at all, I'll save you some time. You won't find one. If, by some near miracle you do, as soon as you join, it won't be a hypocrite-less church anymore.

Paul is dealing with this this morning in this section of Romans 2. He is dealing with hypocrisy and how hypocrisy can keep us from the gospel of grace. Paul has been busy in Romans 1 and 2 stripping away every excuse anyone might have to the gospel. Paul has said over and over again the gospel "...is the power of God unto salvation...", Jesus is declared to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead, and this gospel of salvation is available for everyone. The problem is we live in a world where people say, "No thank you, Paul. I'm not interested."

It's almost like the way people treat the gospel is the way you and I treat telemarketers who call us unannounced. It used to be when you had a landline, people would call you and bother you during dinner. Now, have you noticed, there has been a shift in the last year or two, I'm constantly getting telemarketing calls on my cell phone. When you're a pastor and someone calls and you don't recognize the number, you answer. Because you don't know if it could be an emergency and someone is trying to sell me a car or a yard service or painting or something. My usual response is, "No thank you. Already got one." Sometimes it's not even a real person, it's just a recording, and I can't even say, "No thank you." I just have to hang up on them.

I want you to think about that as the way most people in the world treat the gospel. "Oh, that's nice. Yeah, somebody might need siding, but not me. Somebody might need new windows, but not me. Go visit my neighbor down the street. Jesus is good and all, but you might want to go down to the other side of town. I'm all set."

What Paul is doing here is stripping away every excuse we have to say we don't need Jesus. Now why is Paul doing this? Is he doing this to be cruel? Is he just trying to show everyone how horrible they are? Is Paul's intent this morning that I convince you all you are horrible hypocrites beyond the reach of grace? No. Paul's intention is that you might know that you, no matter how long you have professed Christ, you need Jesus today. You cannot get away from that truth. This morning, I'd like us to see three things from our text.

Hypocrisy of Mind

First, we will see an hypocrisy of mind. A way of thinking that is hypocritical. Next, we will see an hypocrisy of life, the way people live in a way that is hypocritical. Then third, we will see why it is important for us to understand this because we live before a watching world. Hypocrisy of mind, hypocrisy of life, and before a watching world. What Paul has moved from those who were suppressing the knowledge of God to those who were trying to live a moral life and thought that made them good enough before God, but now he is aiming squarely at those who believe their religion gives them an excuse when they stand before God.

He is speaking directly at the Jews, and not just any Jews, but to their committed religious Jews. There is an immediate application here to me and to you. Paul is showing that the gospel is for conservative church members. That's who the gospel is for. The thing is, the world has become such a place of us versus them that we fail to look at ourselves. We fail to look at our own need for the gospel because we're so busy fighting others.

What Paul shows us here first from this text, is an hypocrisy of the mind. Now, by this I do not mean people are believing false things. No, actually what they are believe are true things. What Paul is talking about here is knowing the truth, but not being changed by the truth. Paul begins by listing four advantages the religious people of his day believe they had and believe it made them different from everyone else in the world.

Look with me at verse 17, "But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God and know his will and approve what is excellent..." Paul says. He is getting the attention of the religious people of his day. The problem here is not these things are untrue. The problem is not these things are not a blessing to people. The problem is in taking these advantages Paul is talking about, and believing we have earned them, we deserve them, that God loves us because of what we have done to possess these things. You have to understand the purpose of all these statements is to boast, to take confidence in these advantages.

Paul begins with this. He says, "You call yourself a Jew." Now in this context, this is much more than an ethnic designation. This refers to the unique relationship the Jews had with God because they were chosen by God. What the Jews would say is, "God has chosen us out of all of the nations. We don't need this gospel, we have everything we need. God has already chosen us, he has to love us. Look at how good we are. God chose us because of who we are."

Now this is a clear misunderstanding of the doctrine of election and this is why it is important for you and for me here today as we sit here in a reformed church. We are good Westminsterian Calvinists. We say God chooses those whom he will save. That it is all of God. Yet the temptation can come to us to make election turn around not to be God chose us in spite of who we were, but God chose us because of who we were.

We're just a little bit smarter than other people. We're just a little bit snappier dressers. We just have more Bibles in our home than other people. We're just a little bit better off. Of course God would choose us, because well, look at us. We're a bunch of good people here, right? Paul is preaching to us here after all. You are all here in church, aren't you? You're not out on the golf course. You're not at the mall. You're not asleep in bed.

Paul is directing this word at those whom God has called to himself. When in reality election is about the lack of worth. The Bible tells us God chose Israel because she was the least of the nations, not the greatest. If we're not careful, we can fall victim to this same kind of thinking. Do we rest in election because we think we are so special God had to love us? Or does election do what it should do as a doctrine?

Does it drive us to Jesus Christ because we know we are completely unworthy? That as we stand before God, we are undone. There is no reason as God sees the real me, not the me I put on display on Sunday morning, not the me I put on display at work. That looking at the real me, God would still set his love upon me in Christ. You see, our hope is in Christ.

The next point Paul brings out is he says, "You rely on the law." The Jews would say they have the law and after all, this is a very unique thing. Of all the people in all of the world, only the Jews had been given the law of God through Moses and it didn't stop there. God kept giving them the law through the prophets. Instead of seeing that as giving them greater responsibility, the Jews saw that as a sign they were better than others. They didn't think about the extent of the law and how it showed their failings before a perfect God.

Now once again, this applies to you and me. We live in a world that has forgotten about right and wrong, don't we? It has done away with all standards. We can think that just because we know the standards, we are right before God, but the truth is we stand condemned by the strictness of God's law. That's okay. That's good news because the law then drives us to Jesus. Because if we know we cannot stand before the law, if we know the law is beyond our capability of doing anything, we rush to the one who has done. The law reminds us not of our own merit, but of our need for Jesus.

A third thing Paul says is, "You boast in God." At first glance, we would say, "Paul, how could this possibly be a bad thing? We should boast in God. After all, Paul, in other letters, you say you'll boast only in the cross and you'll boast in the Lord. How could this be a bad thing?" This is something that had come to Israel out of their exile from Babylon. Babylon had conquered Israel, and this had happened because of Israel's idolatry. The Jews had seen Babylon and had seen her destroyed for her idolatry. Now they were thankful they were able to stand around and not be like the other nations.

The problem wasn't they boasted in God, the problem was they were only focused on the knowledge of God. It is one thing to know about God. It is another thing to know God. The first is a prerequisite to the second, but we cannot stop at knowing about God. The Jews gathered as much information about God as they could, and they were satisfied with that. They didn't cultivate their relationship with God and we see this when God sent his Son to redeem them from their sins, they rejected him.

Now again, we have to be careful. It is easy to delight in knowing about God, especially in a culture that looks down on theology. Again, as Reformed Presbyterians, we fit right into this mold. Look at our bookshelves. We have theologian after theologian. Look at all the things we have learned. We have tapes. We have videos. We have Bible studies. The question is, "Does our theology lead to doxology? Does our knowledge of God lead us to the praise of God?" Because, you see, that's what theology is for. It is not to learn things, it is to help us to cultivate the relationship with the Lord our God.

You know what this is like in everyday life. All of you who are married know what this is like. Every man, when he begins to date the woman who was his wife, takes a notebook, either physically or virtually, of everything she does. Her favorite color is red. She likes to eat this. Don't ever order that. She likes to drink this. She likes it hot. She likes it cold. She likes to sit here. She likes to go there. Right? We learn everything we can. Why? So we can pass an exam later on my future wife's favorite color? Of course not. It is because we want to cultivate that relationship. At the end of the day does it matter if her favorite color is red or blue? Of course not, but you learn that to build the relationship. That's what the Jews failed to do.

The fourth thing Paul says is, "That you know God's will and are spiritually discerning." Now they thought they didn't need the gospel because they already knew the will of God. The gospel to them might have been for other people who didn't know what God expects or who can't discern right from wrong or who don't have

God's Word, but we have that after all. The problem with that is knowing God's standards and living by them are two different things.

In reality, they didn't know God's will because if they did, they would know God is perfect, from Psalm 19, and his way is perfect, from 2 Samuel 22. Jesus warns us exactly against that in Matthew 5 when he says, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." In verses 17 and 18, Paul is describing how the religious view themselves as worthy in the context of their relationship with God. Now in verses 19 and 20, he describes how they view themselves in the context of their relationship with the nonreligious.

What happens is the religious people of Paul's day were so busy seeing how they were superior to everyone else, to all of the other sinners around them and the culture, they missed the gospel. This attitude of pride and superiority over their neighbor prevented them from seeing their need for Jesus. Paul tells us this, he first uses a paraphrase in verse 19. He says, "...if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness."

Paul uses these phrases to show how the religious thought they were better because the world needed them. After all, the world is blind. Without God and without his word, and they're lost and unable to find their way. The world is in darkness and they need a light and so the Jews rightly saw that God had given them the truth and the world needed this truth. The problem is they missed their responsibility to spread that truth. They thought they had worth because they had a truth other people didn't.

Brothers and sisters, when we see the lostness of the world, we cannot be proud that we are not like them. We have to see the obligations that come to us from God, that we have to bring the truth to them. This is the whole point of missions. It's not we're the best. It's not we have everything figured out. It's that God has given us this task in spite of ourselves. We are to take this truth to a world that needs Jesus.

The second thing Paul says made the Jews proud in the way they related to people was they thought they were the ones to disciple other people and to reach them and teach them God's will. Paul uses a paraphrase here in verse 20 to describe how the religious thought they were better because they were the best equipped to train other people. He says, "an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth."

You see, the religious thought they were the ones to teach those who were without knowledge, those who were foolish. They were the mature ones who would have to bring up the children around them. They viewed themselves as having arrived. They were the ones who knew what they were doing. By comparing themselves to other people, they felt superior. That superiority was grounded in themselves, not in the gifts and blessings of God. Again, this is a problem.

If they truly knew the embodiment of knowledge and truth, they would understand everything they had was by grace. That God had given to them his promises. That he had given to them his Word. That he had given his law. Not because of who they were, but in spite of who they were. Now this is again especially tempting for us in the Reformed faith. We study God's Word. We love theology. We are equipped to instruct others. Because of this, we can forget the need of God's grace. We can even forget our duty to spread the gospel.

Sometimes I think it's an unwritten rule in reformed churches that our wheelhouse, what we do, is we train other people who others evangelize. We don't want to be bothered with the simple gospel because, look, our doctrine of the Trinity is the best. Our doctrine of the Holy Spirit is the best. You want to know about the substitutionary atonement, just come ask us. We have it all laid out. From first to eighth. Maybe other people can share the gospel and get people to believe in Jesus, but once they do, bring them to us, because we'll make sure they don't get messed up. Sometimes that can be our attitude.

Now, hear me. I'm not saying we shouldn't disciple. We should. I'm not saying we shouldn't study theology. We should, but we shouldn't act as if we are a gift to God because of who we are because of what we know. That is the problem. It can cause us to waiver from the truth.

Hypocrisy of Life

Paul then moves to our second point, to what the life of the religious looks like. Now, he is not satisfied just to uncover their thinking. This is because thinking is not the only problem. It's also their life. This is critical for you to pay attention to because how you live before other people says more about your heart than the things you say. This is clear from Paul's probing questions. He has two probing questions, one about each of two aspects of the law. He says, "While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?" What we have to understand is he is talking specifically about two areas the Jews prided themselves on.

If you asked the Jews to rank all of the Ten Commandments by which ones they were able to keep best, right at the top of the list would be number seven, you shall not commit adultery, and number eight, you shall not steal. They might admit sometimes they don't say things properly and maybe they bear false witness. Or maybe they do some work they shouldn't on the Lord's day. But these two, they got. You see, Paul is using this as an example. He is striking them at their strongest point.

You know how we often hear in arguments that people use a straw man argument? They build up an intentionally weak point so they can knock it down? Not Paul. Paul takes the strongest point possible and he presses home against it. He essentially says, "Do you practice what you preach?" He says, "You warn against stealing, but do you steal?" Now once again, we have to remember the depth and breadth of the law. What Paul is saying here is, "I'm not asking you if you break into your neighbor's home and take his tv?" What I'm asking you is, "Do you work hard all the time at work when your employer is paying you? Do you use just scales when you sell things? Do you borrow things and forget to return them?"

You see, Paul is trying to prove to the religious that the depth and breadth of the law shows we are lost before God. He then begins to speak about adultery. He says, "Do you do that?" Again, this is something the religious of Paul's day, and of our day, think they have under control. Again, we need to probe to the depth of the law as Jesus expands in the Sermon on the Mount. Paul is not just asking if you've had an affair. He says, "What are you thinking? What are you watching on tv and on film? What kind of music do you listen to? What lyrics are in the music? What do you glamorize in our culture? What do you think about other people?"

You see, when we start to look at the law in that sense, once again, we can't say, "Oh, we know what we're doing. Our lives are perfect before others." To forget we are held to the same standards we put up for others, is to think we have no need for grace. We think we have no need for Jesus, no need for his sacrifice, no need for forgiveness because, after all, we have it all together, but there is more. Because when we do that, the world looks at us and sees they have no need for Jesus. The Jesus we preach, if he makes no difference in our lives, why would anyone bother? Why would someone follow Jesus if he makes no difference in your life?

Now, it is like this. You all know how mechanically inclined I am, so take that and just forget about that for the moment. If I said to you, "In order to take care of your car, you need to change your oil every 3,000 miles on the dot. Don't fail. If you do, you never know what's going to happen to your engine and it could probably blow up. You're going to lose your car. You certainly won't get the mileage you need to out of your car."

If you said to me, "Okay, Fred, when was the last time you changed your oil?" I said, "Oh, I don't know. Twenty-five, 30,000 miles ago." You'd say, "Wait a minute here. Why should I listen to word you just said? You don't do anything you're just telling me I have to do. What you're saying must be untrue." Now I want you to notice what I said wasn't untrue. It is true, you should, generally speaking, change your oil every 3,000 miles. Just because it's true, my life can make it look false. This is true of the believer.

Paul next shows that hypocrisy affects not just how we relate to fellow people, but how we relate to God when we live before God. He uses two phrases, again, at the end of verse 22 and in verse 23. He says, "You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law, dishonor God by breaking the law." He is talking to the Jews, who have an absolute hatred for idols. This would have been completely shocking.

The Jews could have expected criticism about any number of things, but not about idolatry because if there was one thing they finally got into their thick heads, it was you don't worship idols. Two generations of captivity in Babylon had beaten that out of them. All up until the point of the exile, they had had difficulties worshipping Baal, worshipping Ashtoreth, going after foreign gods. It was why God sent them into exile. Once they came back from exile, they never set up high places again. They never worshipped the Baals. They had learned their lesson so to speak.

What is Paul doing here criticizing them on this point? What he is saying is, is the way they view God is lost in their life. That is, they may be formally worshipping God, but the rest of their life is given to the love of other things. John Calvin puts it this way. He says our hearts are factories of idols, constantly putting out idols. And it doesn't have to be a totem pole. It doesn't have to be an altar. It could be children. It could be a vacation. It could be a dream job. It could be a dream house. We see these things as things we have to have otherwise we'll never be happy.

The problem is, there is only one object for that kind of desire and it is God. It is only without God that we can never be happy. We can be happy with all kinds of houses, all kinds of cars, all kinds of jobs, all kinds of family sizes, but we can never be happy without God. To deny that is idolatry, Paul says. Second, he shows about how their morality dishonors God. He says how you live your life affects your relationship with God. Perhaps better to put it this way. It shows the reality or not of the relationship someone has with God.

Let me illustrate it this way. If you want to know about my relationship with my wife, what will you do? You will watch me and see how I treat her, how I speak to her, what I do for her. You will very quickly see whether that relationship is strong or not by my actions. Much more so than by my words. This is exactly the case with our relationship with God. Now, I want you to notice what Paul does not say. He does not say here, "Religious people, you're all wet. Don't you know every road leads to God? Why do you get all hung up on this law and all these rules? Don't you know it doesn't really matter? Just do what makes you happy." This is the answer of the world.

You see, the world will tell you you're a hypocrite and then the solution for your hypocrisy is to act like nothing matters and nobody cares. That's exactly not what Paul is doing. Everything Paul is saying is true. What he is saying is you need to be consistent and it needs to be from the heart and you need to understand you can't accomplish it outside of Jesus. That's what Paul is saying. He is calling out the hypocrisy of the religious. They are right in everything they believe, but it is not enough beloved to know the right things. What we know has to affect our hearts, our lives, our very inner being.

Before a Watching World

What Paul concludes here, by reminding us why this is important. It's because we live before a watching world. In verse 24, he tells us how our hypocrisy goes beyond us. It is bad enough if we live lives that are hypocritical, we can become blind to the gospel. Beyond that, we become living barriers to the gospel. He says, "For as it is written, the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

Now think about why Israel was called and set apart. Go all the way back to Genesis, chapter 12, to the beginning. Abraham was called out of Ur, so he would be what? A blessing to the nations. Israel was to be a shining example. The place where God's name dwelt. Jesus gives us this same principle. We, as his people, are to be a city on a hill, to be a light not under a basket, that is not hidden. Now why is this the case? What happens is when professing believers live in contradiction to their profession, they show the worthlessness of

that profession. How important could something be if I ignore it? How can it be true if I deny it by my actions?

Church of Jesus Christ, the greatest barrier to the gospel today is not Hollywood. It is not gay marriage. It is not a culture full of sin. The greatest barrier to the gospel is nominal, hypocritical Christianity. It is Christians who claim to believe in Jesus, but who will not follow him. Now that makes it real for you and me today. Because we can't hope to change the culture. We don't own the entertainment industry. We can't change all of our laws, but you can look at your own life and you can see if you are living in accord with your profession of faith. What do we do?

If we're honest with ourselves, we see our hypocrisy. We know we don't have it all together. We know we need the grace of God just to make it through a single day. The very first thing we must understand is we are witnesses for Jesus. Now understand this. The Bible never calls you to be a witness for Jesus. It never says, "Be a witness." Have you noticed that? What the Bible says is, "You are a witness." It doesn't call you to witness, you already are. You could be a good witness, or you could be a bad witness, but you are a witness if you profess faith in Christ. That's what Jesus says in Acts 1, "...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea...", etc.

There are only two types of people in the world: hypocrites who don't know they are and hypocrites who know they are and know they need Christ. The answer today is not to straighten up and do better. It's not even to practice what you preach. You can't. The answer is to repent and to go to Jesus. He is there for hypocrites. He won't turn you away. He is the only hope for sinners. You cannot work your sin away.

But the good news of the gospel is Jesus is always the answer for sin. He is the way to tear down the barriers to the gospel that exist and the barriers we build. The solution is to run to Jesus. Paul tells us all of us need the gospel. We need Jesus. Trust in him alone today. Let us pray.