

**Religion or Regeneration**  
Romans 2:17-29 (10/21/12)  
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I like the phrase “The proof is in the pudding.” People can say anything they want, make any claims they want, assure you they have what it takes to get the job done, but the proof is in actually doing it. The proof is in the pudding. The same is true with Christianity. Millions of people claim to be Christians. There are 330,000 churches in America. When you add in the mega-churches with their 1000s of attendees, the average size of these churches is 186. When asked if they attend church regularly, 40% of Americans claim they do, but only about 20% actually show up on Sunday mornings.

But how many of all these professing Christians are actually true Christians? The proof is in the pudding, in their lives. Do they really know Christ and do they really have new hearts like Paul is going to lead us to this morning.

Turn to Romans 2:17-29. Paul is winding down his prosecution of the human race as guilty, under the wrath of God, and in desperate need of the gospel. But there is one group of people he must deal with directly, and that is the Jew. What about the Jew? Where do they stand in relation to sin, guilt, the wrath of God, and the need of the gospel? Paul knew the Jew from the inside. Just like Luther knew Catholicism and monkery from the inside, Paul understood how the Jew thought. And in the rest of this chapter, he exposes them as basically religious hypocrites who would agree that the Gentiles are guilty, but not them; they are God’s people. They were loaded with religious privileges and proud of it.

We aren’t Jews. We are professing Christians in a Bible teaching church. We’re Americans. We are Protestants. We live in a land full of churches. We are flooded with Bibles, every conceivable edition of the Bible, more translations of the Bible than we really need. We have Bible-based books flooding the evangelical market (lots of bad ones, too). We have great teaching available from world class preachers at the tap of a finger on our ipods, kindles, laptops, androids, your favorite reader. We’ve got conferences on every conceivable topic, and Bible study tools, and Bible colleges, and a few good seminaries. Surely there was never a time of more religious privileges and opportunities. We’ve got it all out there. But what about our hearts? We may know a lot, but the proof is in the pudding, in our hearts. It’s possible to wear a label like a can with a picture of asparagus, and when you get it home and open it, there’s nothing in there but water.

That’s what we’re dealing with here. We’ll break it down into four parts to see how privilege and position and religion do not mean reality or regeneration.

**First, you can be totally blessed with religious privileges and still be under God’s wrath and judgment – vv. 17-20**

*But if you bear the name "Jew," and rely upon the Law, and boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth.*

These Jews were immensely privileged. They traced their religious privilege all the way back to Abraham and thought in those terms. John the Baptist called them on that. He warned, “Don’t say Abraham is our father, because God can raise up children of Abraham from these stones.” And of course, Jesus lambasted them about this. They argued with Him in John 8, “We are sons of Abraham.” Jesus said, “No, you are of your father the devil!” So there’s some history here. And Paul is reminding them, “You do have privilege!” He identifies ten things they boasted in:

- We're Jews. We are that people whom God brought out of Egypt. He formed us into a nation with the ten commandments and all the plans for the tabernacle, brought us into Canaan, eventually gave us the glories of the Davidic and Solomonic kingdom, and gave us all kinds of promises about a Messiah and about future blessings. We're Jews. We're named after Judah, the root of David!
- We have the Law. We rest in it like a ship in this world.
- We believe in the one true God. We are monotheists, not polytheists like the Greeks and Romans and all the pagans.
- We know what the Word of God says.
- We approve what God says in the Law. We have all kinds of laws to guide us: how far we can walk on the Sabbath, how to carry an egg on the Sabbath, and many more.
- We give guidance to people who don't know the Bible.
- We shine light for all these Gentiles who don't know our God.
- We correct foolish people who are ignorant of God's Word.
- We teach people about God.
- We have in our Law everything we need for life.

There is nothing wrong with most of this. Except that these Jews saw themselves up on a pedestal looking down in religious pride and arrogance. Nothing here is of the heart. It's all external stuff. It is so easy for religion to be just form and knowledge and doctrine, but not reality, not the heart, not personal. This is why this passage is so searching of us. We are Christians. We have the Word of God. We know what God says. We know God says homosexuality and abortion are immoral. We know God exists in three persons. We believe other people need to know these things. We are teachers and preachers of the foolish, ignorant, and immature.

But listen, none of this means spiritual reality in the heart. There are many who have all the externals, but not the realities. Hypocrisy is a huge danger for us, especially for us who preach and teach the Word of God. Is this truth we are dealing with really affecting us on a heart level? Not to mention, has God's truth actually changed our hearts?

How does it happen that Bible believing denominations that sprang out of the Reformation, that were birthed in the Great Awakening, that formed even here in America – how is it that they go liberal? How can we have churches today who are proud of their heritage, are certain they are ok with God, but have gone liberal? There is something really humbling about the history of the church. What happened to the leaders, the pastors, elders, deacons, congregations of the mainline Protestant churches who slowly departed from faith in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, as the pressures to conform to the world swept in? They deserted the biblical teaching of creation and all the doctrines of redemption. Churches like the PCUSA and the UCC not only allow for abortion and homosexuality, but in some cases actually ordain practicing homosexuals as pastors. How in the world does this happen? There's little if any gospel left in the mainline churches. There is no insistence on the exclusivity of Christ, no preaching of the necessity of the new birth, or the substitutionary work of Christ on the cross, or the reality of a coming judgment and eternal punishment for those who do not come to Christ! What happened? And yet, if you ask these people, they are confident all is good between them and God!

Do you see the parallels here with the Jews of Paul's day and the churches of our day? Huge privilege, but major defection from the truth of God! For you and me, this ought to humble us to the dust. "Lord, keep my heart tender to you. Don't let me wander. Help me grow and change and be in submission to your truth." We can teach and counsel others, but listen, be sure you are applying it to yourself! Galatians 6:1 is so good here – if someone needs your counsel, help them, but look to yourself, lest you too be tempted. And Hebrews 3:13 says we need to encourage one another day by day so our hearts don't get hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

**Second, you may preach and teach and counsel others and yet be guilty of hypocrisy yourself – vv. 21-24**

*You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one should not steal, do you steal? You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? For "THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU," just as it is written.*

Paul here is dealing with this huge issue of hypocrisy. Religious hypocrisy. And let me tell you, this is a temptation for every one of us. But these Jews were notorious for it. In Matthew 23 Jesus just rips the Pharisees for all their religious hypocrisy. They put on the outward apparel of religiosity but inwardly they stank of rotting corpses. They were expert speck pickers, but totally blind to their own logs.

Remember, Paul knew these people; he knew their religious hypocrisy. He knew it was all show and impression and external. And here he boldly exposes their sham. They teach others not to steal or commit adultery and condemn others for idolatry and they brag about being people of the Torah, the Law, but they didn't apply it to their own hearts! In fact, Gentiles looked at the Jews, they knew of their hypocrisy, and laughed at their God! "These people who put on a good front but sneak their sins in the background are the people of the true God? Yeah, right! Who needs that kind of God?"

Now let's let this dig into our own hearts. Hypocrisy is one of the greatest dangers and sins of God's people. How many professing Christians are hearers, but not doers? How many professing Christians are Sunday morning Christians? How many of us do what we do to be seen of men? To get the approval of people? To please people? How much of what we do spiritually would we do if no one ever knew? How much are we like those Pharisees in Matthew 6 who give and fast and pray to be noticed by men?

What's a hypocrite? He's an actor. He speaks from under a mask. He's a fake. He tries to convince people of something he's not. Martyn Lloyd-Jones gives several marks of religious hypocrisy. Lay your heart and life beside these and see if you find yourself here:

-He only has a general, theoretical interest in the Bible. When we prepare to preach or teach, we may not be tackled by the truths and dealt with. One of the great temptations in preparing sermons is to prepare hoping people will like it. But this applies to all of us.

-He is complacent or comfortable with his religious privileges. There isn't a sense of real need there. "The hypocrite is a man who is full of confidence, self-confidence." He doesn't really live with the fear of God. He's not really a learner.

-He doesn't go to church out of a sense of personal need. He goes because it's expected, he likes the people there, he is eager to see if the preacher has an interesting comment or humorous story or calls for holy war on people he disagrees with. But his own heart isn't on the table for divine surgery. He doesn't sense any need for it.

-He doesn't preach or teach to himself. So you go back to Paul's list: Do you lust? Do you envy? Do you steal from God? Where's your heart? Are you making a big deal of Christ and the cross, like Bryce urged us last Sunday night, or is it all ritual, external, for others, but you're just "fine and dandy, thank you?" Are you applying God's truth to your own heart?

Our church is known for a high view of God, of the Scriptures, of the cross, of expository preaching verse by verse. We are not entertaining here. We are talking about growing and changing and pleasing God and being in God's Word and giving biblical counsel and teaching the "solas" of the Reformation. Ladies and Gentlemen, there isn't room for an ounce of pride in all this. Let's hold this with great humility and gratitude and prayerfulness. And, let's be sure we are doers, and not just hearers, deceiving our own selves. That's the biggie. To look in the mirror and

leave without heart change is dangerous. Just being around truth isn't good enough, any more than looking at a picture of a sizzling steak and stuffed baked potato will satisfy your hunger.

Back at vs. 24, what does the world see about our God through us? They may say the church is full of hypocrites. They've said that for years. But what do they really see in our lives? What do they see as we face trials and suffering and disease and opposition and failure and disappointments, when stuff comes apart – what kind of God do they see then? Do they see reality, or fake and sham religion?

**Third, you may have all the externals of religion, but that doesn't change your heart. Vv. 25-28**

*For indeed circumcision is of value, if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. If therefore the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? And will not he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh.*

The Jews final retreat was this mark of the covenant handed down since Abraham. We are the circumcised. And it was unthinkable to Jews that a circumcised Jew should ever not be saved. Rabbis taught that Abraham sits at the gate to hell keeping all circumcised Jews out. And Paul says, "No! Your circumcision doesn't mean a thing if your heart isn't changed by the gospel." He even says if an uncircumcised Gentile's heart is changed so that he actually obeys the requirements of the Law, it's like he's circumcised because his heart is! And that's what counts.

Now, just replace circumcision with any external rite or ritual or practice religious people do to get them to heaven. The most obvious is baptism. There are churches that teach when you are baptized is when you are saved. We've probably all heard it. "Are you saved?" "Yes, I was baptized as an infant, or I was baptized at confirmation class." Here's the simple reality. Just putting on a wedding ring doesn't make you married. Just wearing a police badge doesn't make you a cop. The seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church or the two ordinances of the Protestant Church or any other religious ritual doesn't change the heart, regardless of what we're told.

**Fourth, you need a new, circumcised heart. v. 29**

*But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.*

Is this verse true of you? This is the only answer. Whether a Jew or a Gentile...

- True Christianity is inward, not outward. It isn't what you do, what you put on. It's what God has done inside of you.
- True Christianity is of the heart. You need a new one, and that's exactly what the gospel gives you. Your natural heart is cold and dead and running away from God. You need a heart that submits to Christ, believes in Him as your Lord and Savior, and it comes to you, not by your religious privilege or ritual. God gives a new heart.
- True Christianity is the work of the Spirit in your heart, not by your trying to keep some rules. How humbling is all this? The proof is in the pudding, and the pudding is your heart. Is it renewed or not? Has the Spirit of God brought you in a conscious, personal way to the cross, to submit to Christ as your Lord and Savior?
- Who are you concerned about? Your praise is from God, not man! Do you practice your Christianity to impress people, or to please God?