



At one time in his life there was no one more religious than Paul. On one occasion he described his religious pedigree as being *“circumcised on the eighth day; an Israelite from the elite tribe of Benjamin; a strict and devout adherent to God’s law; a fiery defender of the purity of my religion, even to the point of persecuting the church; a meticulous observer of everything set down in God’s law Book”* (Phil. 3:5–6). Paul knew all about religion. But when he met Christ on the Damascus Road everything changed. Do you know what he later said about those religious credentials? He said, *“I’m tearing (them) up and throwing (them) out with the trash—along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why? Because of Christ. Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung. I’ve dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him”* (Phil 3:7–9, *The Message*).

We’ve been studying Paul’s letter to the Romans. He’s been arguing that every single human being who ever lived is deserving of the judgment of God. Starting in 2:17 Paul applies this to the religious, Bible-believing Jew. These people had read all of what Paul had said in Romans up to this point. They’d read Paul’s description of how Gentiles are under the wrath of God because although the truth about God is evident all around them, they suppressed the truth in unrighteousness. Certainly, a Jewish person who read Paul’s analysis of the Gentiles would have agreed with much of what he’d said up to this point. They would have thought, “But we’re not like those people, Paul. We’re different. Our religion sets us apart.” So starting in 2:17ff Paul speaks to his own people—the Jews. And he describes several ways their religion, and all religion, falls short.

Religious People Rely on Profession Without Practice

First, he says religious people rely on profession without practice. He proves his point by listing several things the Jews were proud of.

Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the

embodiment of knowledge and truth—... (Romans 2:17–20).

Here are five things they felt set them apart from others; things which defined them as morally superior:

“You call yourself a Jew” – they were proud of their nationality and all the history they had as God’s people.

“You rely on the law and boast in God” – God had revealed his law to Israel on Mt. Sinai and made a covenant with them.

“You know his will and approve what is superior” – they knew right from wrong; the things that please God and the things that don’t.

“You are a guide to the blind, a light to those in the dark” – they were enlightened; able to see what others couldn’t and so guide them.

“You instruct the foolish and teach little children” – they viewed others as fools and kindergartners in need of instruction.

Paul isn’t saying there’s anything wrong with being Jewish; with knowing and valuing God’s law; with using his commands to inform our choices; or even with sharing these things with others. The problem is they relied on these things but didn’t practice them. Look what he says next.

... you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you” (verses 21–24).

It’s quite clear what Paul is saying: you don’t practice what you preach! He even gives specifics, all of which harkens back to the Ten Commandments: you steal, you commit adultery and you rob temples, which is tantamount to idolatry and probably refers to the fact they somehow profited from the idol worship prevalent in Rome. Certainly Paul is thinking not just of the external manifestation of these sins in their lives, but also sins of the heart. Jesus talked about that in the Sermon on the Mount. When you covet something belonging to your neighbor, you’re stealing from him. When you desire his wife, you’re committing adultery. It’s not just the outward act, it’s what goes on in your heart as well.

Let’s think about this as it relates to us. I’ve talked to people who rely on and boast in the fact they’re Americans or just a good person. “If there is a God, of course he’ll accept me. I may not

be perfect but I'm a decent human being who keeps the Ten Commandments...most of the time." We can even rely on and boast in the fact that we're "Christians" committed to the Bible. It may help for us to insert the word "Christian" for "Jew" and paraphrase verses 17-20 like this, "You call yourself a born again Christian and you're confident you're right with God because you signed a commitment card, or raised your hand, or prayed a prayer, and really felt something. And, hey, you read the Bible and go to church and know the right answer to the questions. You even lead a small group where you instruct others!"

It's not that those things are wrong, but we rely on them rather than on God, and deep in our heart we're practicing all the things we condemn in others. We love to study God's word and debate we know all the right answers but we're not being changed by them. We hear a sermon and we think of so many others who need to hear it, but never apply it to ourselves. We never let the Bible disturb us, convict us, thrill us, or just melt our hearts. Martin Lloyd-Jones writes, "As you read your Bible day by day, do you apply the truth to yourself? What is your motive when you read the Bible? Is it just to have a knowledge of it so you can show others how much you know, and argue with them, or are you applying the truth to yourself? ... As you read, say to yourself, 'This is me! What is it saying about me?' Allow the Scripture to search you, otherwise it can be very dangerous. There's a sense in the more you know of the Bible, the more dangerous it is to you, if you don't apply it to yourself."

Then there's a moral superiority we feel towards others. We do all the things Christians are supposed to do: we attend church, we have a quiet time; we stay out of debt and tithe regularly; we witness to others and go on mission trips; we don't watch porn. And we come to see these things as spiritual achievements and with that we look down on those who've failed in the same areas. But we're blind to the sins of the heart like pride, ambition, envy and worry. You see, religious legalism can't protect the heart from sinning; all it can do is cover it up. And maybe the worst thing is that people who aren't religious see right through it and despise it. Paul is saying, "You were called to be a light to a dark world, but the world finds your religion totally unattractive." What does the world need to see? They need to see humility, love in hard situations, grace under pressure.

Recently Giants pitcher Jeremy Affeldt announced his retirement. He's a committed believer and it's been interesting to listen to what others are saying about him. Almost across the board he's been praised by believers and unbelievers alike. I find that so interesting. I think a lot of it has to do with his humility and his willingness to serve and his refusal to judge his teammates. In fact, he said when he came to The City he stood in judgment of it, but over time he came to love it. He showed that by starting a non-profit to help at-risk youth, and partnered with groups like Not For Sale. It reminds me of what James wrote,

"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27).

Religious People Rely on Ritual Without Reality

So religious people rely on profession without practice. The next thing we see is religious people rely on ritual without reality. Look what Paul says in verses 25-27:

Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.

Paul moves from their pride in having the law to their reliance on the rite of circumcision. The Jews loved to think of how God called Abraham and made a covenant with him and his offspring and the sign of that covenant was, "*Every male among you shall be circumcised*" (Gen. 17:10). So the problem wasn't circumcision in and of itself, it was the assumption this bestowed on them a superior righteousness. They thought of it as a magical ceremony that would endow them with permanent insurance against the wrath of God.

But Paul says circumcision only has value if you keep the law. Circumcision was a part of the covenant and the covenant demanded obedience (Galatians 5:3). So, if you break the law, you may as well be uncircumcised. That's a radical statement, but then he says something even more radical: if those who aren't circumcised keep the law, they'll be regarded as circumcised! So circumcision minus obedience equals uncircumcision, while uncircumcision plus obedience equals circumcision. And in contrast to the traditional picture of Jews sitting in judgment on uncircumcised pagans, the roles will be reversed—the uncircumcised Gentiles will be judging the circumcised Jews!

Now Paul isn't advocating works-righteousness. In fact, he's talking here about Gentiles who believe in Jesus. Look what he says next.

A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God (verses 28-29).

Paul defines what a true Jew is. Being truly Jewish isn't about your nationality or being outwardly circumcised; it's an inward thing; it's having your heart circumcised by the Spirit of God. And that's recognized and applauded not by man who looks at the

outward appearance but by God who sees what's in the secret places of the heart.

By the way, if they'd just read their Bibles they'd know this. In Deuteronomy 10:16 Moses said to the Israelites, *"Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer"* (Dt. 10:16). But they didn't do that. So, much later, the prophets came along and looked forward to a time when God would make a new covenant with his people and he himself would circumcise their hearts. God said through Jeremiah, *"The days are coming... when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh"* (Jer. 9:25). But he also looked forward to a time when he'd *"put his law in their minds and write it on their hearts"* (Jer. 31:33b). And later he said through Ezekiel, *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws"* (Ez. 26:26-27).

That's what Paul is talking about in verses 28-29. He's talking about life in Christ. It's not about outward ritual; it's not about us trying harder to be good people; it's about the Spirit of God invading our hearts and making us people who genuinely seek to do his will. Outward circumcision was just a symbol of the cutting away of the flesh, which is our sinful nature. We can't do that ourselves; it's a deep inner work only God can do, and it's painful. That's why all you men have your legs crossed right now!

What are some of the outward rituals we might depend on today to justify us before God? How about baptism? There are those who think they're right with God because they were baptized as an infant or even as a teenager. There's not a lot of reality in their walk with God, but they have their fire insurance because they were baptized. John Stott said, "Humans are comfortable with what is outward, visible, material, and superficial. What matters to God is a deep, inward, secret work of the Spirit in our hearts." A hallmark of ritual without reality is a total lack of an inner life. On the other hand, authentic Christianity will mean an active prayer life, not out of obligation and duty but out of love. It will mean being sensitive to God's Spirit when he convicts us of sin. It will mean having a genuine concern for those in need, again not out of duty or obligation, but out of love.

I think this is why so many people today are taken with Pope Francis. Our entire nation was captivated a few weeks ago by his visit, and perhaps that's because there's a reality there that's deeper than so many of the outward rituals valued in the Catholic Church. He once said, "Jesus condemns cosmetic spirituality, which attempts to look good, beautiful – but the truth inside is something else." He condemns those who have "good manners but bad habits, those habits that you don't see, but are hidden." He also condemns the false piety of those who desire others to see their good works. He tells the story of how his late brother, a Jesuit himself, had an experience with this type of

hypocrisy. A wealthy woman invited him somewhere to give him a sum of money for the Jesuit missions in Japan, to which he was very committed. When he got there this woman brought him in front of a building, with reporters and photographers lined up, and there she gave him an envelope. He was angry, realizing it as a publicity stunt. He was even more angry when he opened the envelope later and there was only \$10 inside. In light of this, Francis tells us to ask ourselves if ours is "a cosmetically Christian life of appearances, or if it's a Christian life of faith that's active in charity."

Religious People Rely on Objections Without Objectivity

Religious people rely on profession without practice and ritual without reality. There's one more thing: religious people rely on objections without objectivity.

What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.

What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar. As it is written:

"So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge."

But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" Why not say—as some slanderously claim that we say—"Let us do evil that good may result"? Their condemnation is just! (Rom. 3:1-8).

These are some of the most difficult verses in Romans to interpret, so let me try to simplify this. Paul is dealing with some common objections the Jews would have to what he's said. By the way, I love this about Paul. He was always willing to meet people where they're at. Here he is, putting himself in their shoes, respecting them enough to think hard about their questions. And he knew they'd have at least four objections. Let's briefly look at each:

Objection #1: "Paul, are you saying there's no advantage to being Jewish and having God's law?" Paul's answer: "No, I'm not saying that. There's great value in having and knowing the words of God."

Objection #2: "But aren't you saying those words and promises of God to the Jews have failed because of their own unfaithfulness to the covenant?" Paul's answer: "Not on your life! God could never break a promise! Part of God's covenant with them was if

they failed at their end of the covenant, they'd incur a curse. Even King David said when he sinned God was proved right and his verdict justified."

Objection #3: "But if unrighteousness is necessary for God's righteousness to be seen, how is it fair for him to judge?" Paul's answer: "If that were true, God wouldn't judge anyone in the world. And we all agree that He should."

Objection #4: "Well then, if me sinning makes God look better, that means I should sin more so his glory is more clearly seen." Paul's answer: "I've been accused of saying this, but that's just slander. Whoever says that is worthy of judgment."

All of these objections show us when deeply held views are challenged, as Paul was challenging the views held by so many Jews, reactions are going to be strong. Paul has just said a person isn't a Jew who is one outwardly. A Jew is one who has the presence of the Spirit of God in his heart through faith in Jesus, the Messiah. It's not knowledge of the Law or the rite of circumcision that makes a person a Jew, it's faith in the Messiah. This was an attack on everything they believed and so they come back with their own objections.

The more attached you are to your position, the deeper your passions will flow and the less objectivity you'll have. Think of the outrage in our own country just about 60 years ago when nine black students enrolled at formerly all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, testing the Supreme Court ruling that declared segregation unconstitutional. On the first day of classes the Governor of Arkansas reacted by calling in the state National Guard to bar the black students' entry into the school. A few years later in Oxford, Mississippi, James Meredith, an African American, was escorted onto the University of Mississippi campus by U.S. Marshals. That set off a deadly riot. Two men were killed before the racial violence was quelled by more than 3,000 federal soldiers.

When deeply held views are challenged reactions will be strong. It reminds me of something Frederick Buechner said, "If there is a terror about darkness because we cannot see, there is also a terror about light because we can see. There is a terror about light because much of what we see in the light about ourselves and our world we would rather not see, would rather not have been seen." I believe that's what Paul's critics were experiencing. Paul was shining the light of truth on them and their dark world, and it terrified them.

For some of us to drop our religion—the dangerous kind of religion Paul has been exposing in this passage; the kind of religion that ultimately will send us to hell—if we're going to truly embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ, which offers us forgiveness and a right standing with God not based on our own works but on the righteousness of Jesus Christ, we'll have to be ruthlessly honest with ourselves and be willing to reconstruct how we think about our relationship with God.

Think of it this way: it's like we experience the death of a husband. We were married to a man named Law. Law was a good man, in his own way, but he didn't understand our weakness. Law came home every night and asked, "How was your day? Did you do what I told you to? Did you make the kids behave? Did you waste any time? Did you do everything I put on your list?" So many demands and expectations, and we really wanted to please him. But hard as we tried, we couldn't be perfect. We could never satisfy Law. We forgot things important to him. We let the children misbehave. We failed in other ways. It was a miserable marriage. Law always pointed out our failings. We never felt accepted. The worst of it was, he was always right! But his remedy was always the same: Do better tomorrow. We didn't because we couldn't.

Then Law died and we remarried, this time to a man named Grace. Grace comes home every evening and the house is a mess, the children are being naughty, dinner is burning on the stove, and all we've accomplished is reading *People* magazine. Still, he sweeps us into his arms and says, "I love you, I chose you, I died for you, I'll never leave you nor forsake you." We don't understand such love. We expect him to despise us and reject us and humiliate us, but he treats us so well.

Over time, we find being married to Grace is transforming us deep within, and it shows. We **want** to do the things that please him, not because we have to but because we love him. Being married to Law never changed us. We had no joy or peace with Law either. It was all just guilt and duty and fear.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, why would you want to go back to the Law when you can live with Grace? Why would you want to rely on profession without practice, ritual without reality, and objections without objectivity?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.