

“Religious Evil, Part 2”
Romans 2:17-29
October 16, 2022

INTRODUCTION:

Everyone, apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, resists the idea of personal sin. Secularists will at times roll their eyes when others talk about sin in a serious manner, or wink when they talk about it themselves. They regard sin as a guilty pleasure like a rich dessert or some sexual activity. But when someone like a preacher talks about sin, the preacher is often accused of being too judgmental.

It's not just the secularist who resists the idea of personal sin; religious people do the same. George Whitefield, the famous 18th century British evangelist, was able to reach members of the British aristocracy with the gospel of Jesus. Among those was the Countess of Huntingdon, who then introduced Whitefield to her friends. In these small gatherings of wealthy elites, Whitefield would preach the gospel of grace. And like Paul, he would always describe sin as original, indwelling, and universal. Despite the fact that nearly everyone in these small gatherings was a member in good standing of the Church of England, many would object to Whitefield's theology of sin. For example, the Duchess of Buckingham protested:

[These] doctrines are most repulsive and strongly tinged with impertinence and disrespect towards their Superiors, in perpetually endeavouring to level all ranks and to do away with all distinctions. It is monstrous to be told you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting; and I cannot but wonder that your ladyship should relish any sentiment so much at variance with high rank and good breeding.

Beginning in chapter 2, Paul addresses those who use their religion to avoid God. They fail to see their own sin, and Paul wants to correct that and open their eyes to their own sinfulness. He does so out of love, that the power of the gospel might be experienced in their lives. Today's passage describes two more sins to which the religious but unbelieving Jew is particularly prone and, we might add, to which the evangelical Protestant is also prone. Both of these sins misuse two of the greatest gifts God gives to his people.

I. Misuse of God's Word – v. 17-24

One of the common features of all evil is to use God's gifts against God. For example, a person who is blessed of God to have a lot of money can easily use that money to avoid dependence on God. A person given great intelligence by

God might choose to use that intellect selfishly, even to convince him or herself that God is unnecessary. A person blessed with a good sense of humor might use that gift to win the approval of people, instead of rejoicing in God's approval. Paul points out in these verses how religious people do the very same thing. In this first paragraph, he describes the gift of God's word in the Old Testament, entrusted to the Jewish people.

Remember that Paul is addressing in these verses an imaginary dialogue partner, indicated by the second person singular pronoun, "you," that he uses throughout. This imaginary dialogue partner is obviously a Jewish man who is quite religious but hasn't come to faith in Jesus. In verses 17-20, Paul lists fifteen elements of Jewish association with God's word. Let's consider just a few of them. He says that God's word allows his people to **"know his will and approve what is excellent"** (v. 18). What he means by that is that the Bible will help a person discern the best course of action when he finds himself in uncertain and ambiguous situations. How many times do you encounter a situation in life when you just don't know what is best? It may be a parenting challenge, a business challenge or just a big decision that needs to be made. God's word will help you know what the best course of action would be. It doesn't serve this function by giving you detailed instruction about every possible life situation. Rather, it does so by changing you into a wise person able to discern the best course of action.

Verses 19-20 list several different ways that Paul's imaginary dialogue partner has been able to be a teacher of God's word. This indicates an even deeper knowledge and grasp of the word. Anyone who has ever taught knows that you learn something in a deeper way when you teach it to someone else. In his teaching role, he has been able to be a guide to the blind, which is likely a reference to Gentiles. He has also been a light to those in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, and a teacher of children. These things speak of the desperate need of those who don't have the benefit of God's word. To be without this benefit is to be in darkness, a condition that is marked both by danger and despair. It is to be foolish, which Paul equates elsewhere with not understanding the will of the Lord (Eph. 5:17) and the book of Proverbs likens to a general failure in all aspects of life. It is to be an infant, someone who is vulnerable to every threat that comes along, as opposed to a mature person who is strong and stable. The word of God brings these benefits and more.

Yet his dialogue partner has an obvious problem when it comes to his relationship with God's word. Perhaps we are given a hint of this in the language of verse 19, when he introduces all these teaching roles with the words, **"And if you are sure..."** Is this a misplaced confidence? Note that in all of these roles listed in verses 19-20, Paul's imaginary dialogue partner is in the position of power. He is the teacher with all the answers, sure of himself and holding himself above the others. His problem with God's word is made explicit in verses 21-23, where we read that he doesn't practice what he preaches. He

preaches against stealing while being guilty of that sin himself. He commits adultery while preaching against adultery. He teaches about the evils of idolatry while robbing temples. Temples were known to be repositories of valuables of various kinds, making them a common target of thieves. Paul is speaking here of Gentile temples where idolatrous practices would be present. Even if it was uncommon for Jews to rob the temples themselves, perhaps they traded in these stolen goods for personal profit. In all three of these examples—stealing, adultery and idolatry—they are being hypocrites.

God's word is a great gift to us, intended to act powerfully in our lives to bring about necessary and life-giving change. We should think of God's word as a "speech-act." What that means is that God accomplishes his good work in our lives by speaking through his word. It is like God's work at creation, where we read repeatedly, "And God said, 'Let there be...' and there was." God's powerful word is intended to accomplish the same in our lives, and in the life of Paul's Jewish dialogue partner in this passage. But something has happened here to short-circuit that process. What is it?

Their problem with the word is the one that Paul had identified in verse 13. **"For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified."** To say that differently, the word of God had affected their minds, but not their hearts and wills. There had been only a shallow reception of God's word, resulting in a lack of repentance. Shallow knowledge is a dangerous thing. In his book, *Think Again*, Wharton professor Adam Grant makes reference to something called the "Dunning-Kruger effect." It's an effect wherein "people who scored the lowest on tests of logical reasoning, grammar, and sense of humor had the most inflated opinions of their skills." More precisely, they discovered that when someone knows nothing about a topic, they are quick to acknowledge their limitations on that. But if they know just a little, they become experts in their own minds. Then, the more a person comes to know about the topic, the more they realize how much they don't know. On a graph, they refer to that period of a little knowledge and high confidence as "Mount Stupid." When our son was four years old, he saw a PBS show on brain surgery. Not long after that, we had a gathering of adults in our house and found him lecturing the adults on brain surgery.

Paul is addressing a situation of people living on "Mount Stupid," knowing enough to know what the Bible teaches but failing to allow that word to penetrate deeply into the heart. Jesus explained how we should go about allowing the word to penetrate our hearts in his Sermon on the Mount. He said that we should understand the commands not just as laws to guide our behavior. They are also laws to guide our hearts. So when we read, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," we are to understand that as not just prohibiting sexual relations with someone other than a spouse. It also forbids the desire of the heart to do that. When we take that step, it becomes clear that we are both

guilty and powerless, in need of God's forgiveness and strength. So it leads us to humble repentance.

The failure to look to God's word to lead us to humble repentance does great damage. **"The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you"** (v. 24). When God's people fail to allow the word of God to lead us to humble repentance, why do we expect a different response among unbelievers? Perhaps the biggest obstacle to revival in our nation lies in the failure of the Church at this point.

II. Misuse of Church Membership – v. 25-29

The next paragraph deals with Jewish pride in their circumcision. That was the rite that indicated that a person was included as a member of God's people. In this patriarchal culture, only males were circumcised, and females were considered part of God's people through association with a circumcised male. Much of this pride in their circumcision stemmed from two centuries prior to this when a Greek ruler named Antiochus ruled Judea. He wanted to impose Greek culture on the Jews and attempted to do so by outlawing both temple sacrifices and circumcision. Not surprisingly, there was fierce opposition among the Jews to this attempt. Parents became willing to die to have their sons circumcised. This rite became the principal sign of loyalty to God and to his covenant. Eventually, Jewish rabbis said that no circumcised man would go to hell and that circumcision would save the nation.

Paul is not opposed to the rite of circumcision, though he did acknowledge that baptism had replaced circumcision as the rite of initiation during this church era. He said that this external rite had value. **"For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law"** (v. 25). Circumcision is the cutting of part of the male organ which was prone to accumulate dirt in a culture where scarce water was preserved for more necessary things than daily showers. So it was a symbol of the requirement for God's people to live holy lives that were free from the filth of the sinful flesh. Paul's point is that it is inappropriate to take pride in the outward sign while ignoring the inner reality. To do so, he says, is in effect to be uncircumcised.

The application for us is obvious. Just as circumcision was the outward symbol that a person was part of God's people, for us baptism is a sign that a person is a member of the church. To take pride in one's baptism and church membership, while at the same time living a life that is at odds with that, is to be guilty of the same thing that Paul is addressing here. It is using God's gift of baptism and church membership to escape a relationship with God. We could extend this to the other sacrament of the church, the Lord's Supper. There is an error known as "sacramentalism" that views the outward sacrament as conveying God's grace independent of one's faith.

The other side of this needs emphasis in our day. Just as there are some people who boast in their church membership, I find it far more prevalent today for people to discount entirely both church membership and the sacraments of the church, regarding them as irrelevant to a faithful walk with God. Paul did say, **“circumcision indeed is of value.”** Baptism and the church membership that it brings has value. I am thankful that God has put on the hearts of our youth pastor, Clint, and our children’s director, Catie, a desire to work together to disciple our children to grow up to love the church and not to abandon it once they leave home. They are also discipling them to learn to love God from the heart and not to be satisfied with mere church membership.

CONCLUSION:

In both of the areas Paul addresses here, his goal is to get us to go to the heart. We must not content ourselves with mere knowledge of God’s word, even if it rises to the point of teaching others. Knowledge that leads to obedience from the heart is God’s goal. And we must not content ourselves with church membership alone, but must embrace the relationship with God indicated by our church membership. Paul wants us to engage at a heart level. Why? Because when we do so we come face to face with the extent and the power of our sin nature. We come to see that it is a problem only God can solve, and the gospel is the good news of God doing just that through our Lord Jesus as we take our sin to him in repentance and faith.

One of the characters in C. S. Lewis’s Narnia Chronicles is a boy named Eustace. We are introduced to him as a smug and selfish boy. Through a series of events, he becomes a dragon, which is really just an outward display of the creature he already was on the inside. He had a dragon heart, and now has become a literal dragon. It ended up being a good thing, because now he comes to see for the first time that he has had a dragon heart all along. He longs to change and tries repeatedly to get rid of his dragon skin, failing every time. He cannot “undragon” himself. Aslan, the Christ figure in the book, has to intervene. When he does, Eustace asks forgiveness and is then changed from the inside out, so that his dragon skin is finally removed by Aslan.

Paul’s goal here is to get us all to see that we have a dragon heart that defies all self-effort at reform. We will never be ready for the gospel until we first see this, and we must continue to see it all of lives. So I would ask you to pray that God will show you your heart. You need not be afraid of what he might reveal to you, because Jesus can change the dragon heart back into a good heart.

Discussion Questions
Romans 2:17-29

1. How does our culture resist the idea of sin?
2. How do you tend to resist the idea of sin?
3. Paul is attempting in this passage to help religious people see their own sin. He does so by taking two things his imaginary Jewish dialogue partner has taken pride in, the law of God and circumcision, and showing him how he has misused both. He has used the gifts of God against God. Have you seen any way you have done the same?
4. Verses 17-20 list fifteen elements of God's word. Which of these particularly strike you?
5. Paul gives three examples in verses 21-22 of how this person does not practice what he preaches: theft, adultery and idolatry. Each of these involves an overt sin, but also a heart sin. The violation of these commands was likely in the area of sins of the heart. What are some of the heart sins associated with each of these areas?
6. Paul says in verse 24 that "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." How might humble repentance of heart sins today help lead unbelievers to faith in Jesus? Can you think of examples of that?
7. Are there ways God might be calling you to be more honest before unbelievers about your need for Jesus?
8. The Jews boasted in their circumcision while neglecting the heart of what circumcision symbolized—the removal of sinful filth. What does our baptism signify and how might we be more faithful to what that?
9. Paul says that circumcision does indeed have value. In our context, we would say that baptism and church membership does have value. How might we as a church help our children grow up to love the church and her Lord, and not abandon that? Pray that we might be a church that disciples our children toward that. Pray also for those who have grown up here and are now wandering from the Lord.