

Costumes for Grown-Ups

Romans 2:17-29

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Every year around the United States, children dress up in costumes for Halloween. For most kids, this is simply a chance to dress up in a fun outfit, maybe getting to dress up as one of their favorite characters. Kids enjoy dressing up and playing make-believe. This is generally a good and healthy outlet for them. It teaches them to use their imagination, and gives them a chance to think about what it is like to be another person.

Superheroes tend to be some of the most popular costumes. In recent years, the Marvel superheroes have been popular choices. At other times, Superman was a popular costume. If you ever look closely at the packaging these costumes come in, however, you may notice a strange warning: “Wearing this costume does not enable you to fly.” We may laugh at this warning, but it is there because sometimes children can forget that just putting on a costume doesn’t actually turn them into Superman. As a result, they might try to do things that Superman can (like fly) without realizing that they’re just in a different set of clothes.

In our passage this morning, the Apostle Paul reminds us that this is not a mistake made only by children. Adults can do the same thing. We may not be confused about whether putting on a Superman costume enables us to fly, but we do sometimes imagine that by simply putting on the external trappings of something, we actually become that thing. Today Paul points us to the danger that can happen when we do religious things, but those things are only external. He reminds us that what really matters is what is in our hearts and challenges us to take a closer look, lest we too be caught off guard thinking we’re one thing, when we’re actually another.

Religious Hypocrisy

Over the last couple of weeks, we have been following along as Paul builds his argument, pointing us to the fact that each one of us is desperately sinful, and hopelessly lost. He has been systematically dismantling the arguments we make to convince ourselves that while “those other people” may be terrible sinners, that isn’t the case with us. In our passage this morning, he turns his attention to those who believe they are good because they are religious. Look at what he says in verses 17-24,

¹⁷ You who call yourselves Jews are relying on God’s law, and you boast about your special relationship with him. ¹⁸ You know what he wants; you know what is right because you have been taught his law. ¹⁹ You are convinced that you are a guide for the blind and a light for people who are lost in darkness. ²⁰ You think you can instruct the ignorant and teach children the ways of God. For you are certain that God’s law gives you complete knowledge and truth.

²¹ Well then, if you teach others, why don’t you teach yourself? You tell others not to steal, but do you steal? ²² You say it is wrong to commit adultery, but do you commit adultery? You condemn idolatry, but do you use items stolen from pagan

temples? ²³ You are so proud of knowing the law, but you dishonor God by breaking it. ²⁴ No wonder the Scriptures say, “The Gentiles blaspheme the name of God because of you.” (Romans 2:17-24, NLT)

Paul directs his argument here to those who call themselves Jews. He lists several things these Jewish people might point to as evidence they have a special relationship with God.

- They have a special relationship with Him because He gave them the law (v. 17)
- They know what He wants because of the law (v. 18)
- They believe they are a guide to the blind and a light to the dark (v. 19)
- They can instruct those ignorant of the ways of God (v. 20)
- They are certain God’s law gives complete knowledge and truth (v. 21)

As we look at these statements, we would actually agree with this assessment! The Jewish people were given a special relationship with God, and He chose to reveal His Word to them. They were the group through whom the light of God’s truth would come into a dark world. As we look at these statements, we recognize that not only were they true of the Jewish people, they are also true of Christians today! These are true statements, but Paul isn’t done yet.

The second part is where he launches his attack. He asks, “If you teach others, why don’t you teach yourself?” He then goes on to point out the hypocrisy that existed among the Jewish people. They told people not to steal, but they found many other ways to take what wasn’t theirs. They condemned adultery, but many practiced it themselves. They knew God’s law and told others about it but didn’t keep it.

The sad reality is that we know this is true for Christians today as well, don’t we? We rant and rail against some behaviors while engaging in the same type of sin ourselves.

- We condemn sexual perversions like homosexuality and transgenderism, but we engage in sex outside of marriage, we live together as husband and wife without committing to Christian marriage, or we look lustfully at people, treating them as objects for our pleasure.
- We tell people not to lie, but we leave loopholes in our minds for when we fill out our taxes, or deal with insurance companies, or when we are trying to make a sale. We tell ourselves that sometimes you need to shade the truth to get ahead. We argue that we aren’t lying, we are simply leaving out information no one asked for.
- We preach love, but we turn around and talk terribly about people with whom we disagree, often to many other people.
- We demand that people show us respect, but we are unwilling to extend respect to those we don’t feel deserve it or who don’t extend it to us.
- We proclaim that Jesus is the most important thing in our lives, but we frequently find excuses why we can’t attend church, why we don’t read our Bibles, why we don’t pray, or why our lives are not consistent with what we know to be true.
- We condemn greed but will wear ourselves out trying to make sure we have all the trinkets we desire.

Paul's point here is that it is good to know the law—it is a huge benefit and blessing to know the truth of God's Word. But if we don't actually follow it, that benefit is lost! Even more than that, Paul shows us that in so doing, we cause people to blaspheme the name of God.

Do you know the biggest objection people have to the Christian faith? It isn't that they find the message of the gospel too far-fetched. It isn't that they don't believe Jesus existed. The most common objection people give to the Christian faith is that Christians don't seem to believe what they preach. They argue that Christians are some of the most angry and unkind people in the world. They point to people who act one way on Sunday and are a completely different person the rest of the week. They point to experiences they had where people in the Church turned on them and attacked them rather than loving them and coming alongside them. And they point to Christian leaders who know the truth and yet stumble into the same sins they condemn.

Paul points us to the fact that while it is tempting to believe we are better than other people because we have the truth, or because we know the Bible front to back, or know all the facts about the Christian faith—simply having all the information is worthless unless we do something with it.

The point Paul is building is twofold. **First, is that we aren't as good as we think we are.** It is tempting in each of these sections to think about all the other people who would fit Paul's description, but he continues to point out the hypocrisy and sinfulness in each one of us. He wants us to see that we are hopelessly lost and in desperate need of a Savior. He is building a case that will point us to the fact that our only hope of salvation is by trusting in what Jesus has done for us.

Second, he is pointing to the need for consistency in living. Paul understood that when we claim to believe one thing but our lives say differently, it catches the attention of the watching world, and not in a good way. Not only does our sin harm us, it harms the message of the gospel as well. People will not listen to our arguments for the gospel as long as they don't think we really believe it. We must strive for consistency because it is what God desires and what is best for us, but also because if we don't, we cause people to turn away from Jesus.

Religious Rituals

Paul continues his argument by attacking the next stronghold that many hide under—the fact that we are “religious” people. Listen to what he says in verses 25-29,

²⁵ The Jewish ceremony of circumcision has value only if you obey God's law.

But if you don't obey God's law, you are no better off than an uncircumcised Gentile. ²⁶ And if the Gentiles obey God's law, won't God declare them to be his own people? ²⁷ In fact, uncircumcised Gentiles who keep God's law will condemn you Jews who are circumcised and possess God's law but don't obey it.

²⁸ For you are not a true Jew just because you were born of Jewish parents or because you have gone through the ceremony of circumcision. ²⁹ No, a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God. And true circumcision is not merely obeying the letter of the law; rather, it is a change of heart produced by the Spirit. And a person with a changed heart seeks praise from God, not from people. (Romans 2:25-29, NLT)

God gave the Jewish people the rite of circumcision to be a physical reminder of the fact that they belonged to God. It was a reminder of God's promise that He would bless the seed of Abraham. It was also intended to set them apart from the world around them, and to remind them that they had a unique and special relationship with God.

Unfortunately, the Jewish people often began to believe that simply because they were circumcised, they were good with God. This was a repeated problem throughout Jewish history. The prophet Jeremiah was sent to correct the Jewish people, telling them that they would be destroyed if they didn't change. He told the people to circumcise themselves before the Lord, but he was speaking to Jewish people already who would have already been circumcised, so what was he saying? He makes it clear in the next sentence when he tells them to circumcise their hearts (Jeremiah 4:4, cf. NIV)

How do you circumcise your heart? This isn't a physical act, but a spiritual one. Jeremiah was telling these Jewish people that mere outward obedience to the Lord was worthless. Unless those rituals reflected an inward reality, they had little value at all.

This is the same argument Paul makes in these verses. He said that it is not enough to go through the rite of circumcision, or even to be born of Jewish parents. He even said that the kind of circumcision God desires is not about obeying the letter of the law—it is about a changed heart.

Paul was speaking specifically to Jewish people here, but it is not difficult for us to see how these same truths apply to people in churches today. There are many religious rituals that can lead us to a false sense of security if they are merely rituals.

Many people point to the fact that they have been baptized as evidence that they are right with God. If you have ever been to one of our baptismal services, you have heard us say up front that baptism doesn't save anyone. Rather, it is an outward sign of an inward reality. I had a pastor who was fond of saying that if you got baptized but didn't follow Jesus, then you didn't get baptized, you just got wet. Baptism has value, but it is like circumcision in the sense that it is supposed to be a reminder and reflection of our commitment to Jesus. It should drive us to follow Him, not lull us into a sense of complacency.

The same can happen with taking communion, going through confirmation, becoming a member of a church, attending worship regularly, giving regularly to the church, learning facts about the Bible, or even serving in the church. These are all good things, but if they become the source of our confidence—if we believe we're good with God simply

because we have participated in these rituals, then they are not only worthless, they are dangerous.

When talking to people about the gospel, I often hear things like, well I've been baptized, or I was raised in the church, or my family are believers, or I believe in God. They point to these things as evidence that they are in good shape, and as such, they are closed-off to the message of the gospel, thinking it does not apply to them.

This is why I am cautious about places that seem to want to record as many "decisions" or baptisms as they can. Sometimes this happens at conferences or summer camps. Sometimes it even happens in worship services. These places believe they are getting people saved, but often what happens is that they get people worked up into an emotional state and convince them to participate in some religious ritual. If there is a genuine conversion, this is a wonderful thing! But many times it is not a genuine conversion, but a conditioned response to an emotional stimulus or to external pressure to conform. When we do this, we are inoculating people against the true gospel message, because these people are unsaved, but they believe they are good because of the rituals they once performed. They tune out the gospel because they believe it doesn't apply to them. They took care of that problem long ago.

This is precisely the attitude Paul was trying to combat in these verses. He was trying to combat the complacency and hard-heartedness that can come from religious ritual. We can convince ourselves that we are in good shape because of all these outward things we are doing, but if our hearts are not devoted to the Lord, then we are just as lost as the atheist indulging in every manner of sin they can. These rituals have value, but only if they reflect our embracing of the truths that underlie them.

Paul points us to the fact that a genuine belief results in a genuine change. Probably one of the scariest verses in all of scripture comes from Jesus,

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' (Matthew 7:21-23, NLT)

Notice what these people pointed to. They said they had prophesied in Jesus' name, they had driven out demons, they had performed miracles! And yet, Jesus told them that He had never known them. Simply doing religious things cannot save you. It is about a changed heart—a heart that follows Jesus in everything we do.

Conclusion

This passage is designed to strip away all the excuses we can come up with for why we are good on our own apart from God. It is designed to point religious people to the fact that their religion cannot save them, only Jesus can. It is designed to cause us to take a long look at ourselves and see where our hearts truly lie.

With that, I think there are a few lessons we should take from this passage.

First, we need to honestly examine our hearts. We are very good at pointing to all sorts of external things as evidence of why we're good with God. The problem is that these things make it easy for us to hide what's really in our hearts. James Montgomery Boice told of a time when he lived in Switzerland, and of a big celebration before lent where people indulged in all sorts of sinful behavior. He said that the Salvation Army took out billboards that simply said, in German: *Gott sieht hinter deine Maske*. It means "God sees behind your mask." We need to remember that we can fool lots of people (including ourselves), but God knows what is truly in our hearts. We must be honest with ourselves and examine whether we are truly followers of Jesus, or whether our religion is something ancillary that we do to convince ourselves we are good. One can save, the other cannot.

Second, we need to remember our sin doesn't only affect us. Paul reminds us that when we claim to be Christians but don't live consistently with our proclamation, it hinders the gospel message. It causes people to question whether Christianity is real or not. Remember that one of the biggest objections people have to the Christian faith is the people who call themselves Christians! This does not mean that we must be perfect, because we cannot. But we should be people who are honest about our sin, own up to it, and seek forgiveness from those we have hurt. When we try to justify or explain away our sin, we are behaving like the rest of the world. Strive to live a life that is consistent with God's Word and be honest and seek to rectify the times when you fail to do so. Sin has a negative effect on us, but it also affects the world around us.

Third, we need to look for areas of hypocrisy in our lives. What are the things we condemn in others, but overlook in ourselves? Do we commit similar kinds of sins in the way we talk, the way we think, or the things we do? The sad reality is that most of the time, other people see our hypocrisy far more readily than we do. This is why I would challenge you to invite a close friend to hold you accountable. Give them permission to tell you when there are inconsistencies in your life, then help you deal with them. If you will do that, it will not only help you be more consistent in your walk with Christ, but it will also make you more likely to extend grace to those who are struggling with similar sins.

Paul's goal here is not to cause Christians to doubt their salvation. His intent is not to make us constantly look over our shoulders to wonder whether we've been good enough. His point is to tell us that we cannot be good enough. He is pointing us to the fact that our only hope is to trust in Jesus to save us and forgive us of our sin, and to challenge us to follow Him with our lives.

Paul understood that many people wear masks in their lives. We hide who we really are from the people around us. Often, we get so involved in our costumes that we don't see ourselves for who we really are. We become like the child who believes he can fly simply because he's wearing a Superman costume. Paul reminds us that God sees behind the mask—so we should carefully examine what's there as well.

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