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**Romans 2:17-29 | Matter of the Heart**

## **I. Introduction**

Good morning! Well, we are three days post-turkey, so hopefully you have all the feast-induced-coma worked out of your system and you're ready to look at God's word together. I'm Ethan. I'm one of the pastors here at Union and one of the things I'm genuinely thanking God for this week is the privilege of preaching to *this* people. I love God, I love God's word, and I love this church. And I get to worship God by preaching his word to you. That's a deep privilege.

We've been working our way through Romans 1 & 2 this fall and today, we're coming to the end of this leg of our journey and pivoting into an Advent series in John 1 starting next week. But today we get to finish out Romans 2. So if you haven't already, grab your bible and get your eyes on that text.

You might have heard the story of the young lady who always cut her pot roast in half before putting it in the oven and when someone asked her why, she said "Well I'm not sure, this is just how my mom taught me." So she went and asked her mom, "Mom, why do we cut the roast in half?" and her mom said, "I don't know, this is just how my mother taught me." So they went and asked Grandma, "Grandma, why do we cut the roast in half?" And Grandma said, "Because my roasting pan was too small for the whole roast." It's easy to treat things as given without realizing why they are the way they are, right? One thing we can't treat as a given is the gospel. As Christians, we can't be a people who follow Jesus, but don't know why. We need to know about salvation, and if we're going to do more than puppet back theological terms, we need to know why salvation is necessary, how it is accomplished, and how it transforms our life. That's the foundation Paul is building in Romans 1 & 2 as he writes about the gospel, sin, and God's judgment.

The amount of attention Paul gives to our sin and God's judgment here at the beginning of Romans should catch our attention. After his thesis statement in 1:16 "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation" for the rest of chapter 1, all of the chapter 2, and even into chapter 3 Paul makes the case for why everybody is unrighteous, everybody is choosing to walk happily into the wrath of God, and everybody will one day face God's fair judgment for their sin. We are meant to feel the depth of our sin, the weight of God's justice, and the terror of his wrath.

And in the face of that terror we have to ask, *Who will save us? What will make us right with God?* The problem is that we are constantly tempted to do the same thing I do when I get on the scale. I look down at the numbers, experience a jolt of foreboding, and make dozens of plans for improvement. *Tomorrow I will do better!* But jolts of foreboding and scrambling plans of action don't solve my problem. And in the same way, when we see our unrighteousness we are bent toward grasping for righteousness through our own scrambling efforts, but effort won't solve our problem.

Throughout Romans Paul is teaching two groups of people in the church: gentiles and Jews. The gentiles are the ones who have lived outside God's law, they've practiced idolatry and immorality and to them he says, you have no excuse. You're under God's wrath. But amazingly, Paul doesn't stop with condemning irreligious people. He turns to the religious, morally upright, Bible-believing Jew who listens to Paul's critique of the immoral idolater and thinks, *I'm not like those people*. And what Paul says to the religious person is, *Actually you're just like those people. You're relying on external things, but **only faith that works its way from the inside out can make us right with God.***

So let's look at The Book. The first thing we're going to see is that you cannot rely on your external proximity to the things of God to save you.

## II. Proximity (2:17-20)

Paul writes to provoke his readers in 17, "But if you call yourself a Jew..." Imagine someone writing to you, "if you call yourself a Christian..." Then Paul is going to name the things that might give a Jewish believer a sense of confidence and security before God. He says, "you call yourself a Jew." They relied on their nationality. You "rely on the law." They drew a sense of security from their knowledge of God and his commands. "You boast in God." They brag about God's choosing the people of Israel. In verse 18 he says, "[You] know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law;" They had been taught the Bible and were able to discern right from wrong. He says, you're self assured that "you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness,<sup>20</sup> an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children," So not only have they received the law, but they teach others the things of God.

The sin that Paul is calling out here is not Jewishness. The problem also isn't that these people knew the law, or that they were able to discern right from wrong, or that they taught others the things of God. The sin is that they have made their proximity to the things of God as Jewish people into the source of their righteousness before God.

Now, most of us aren't ethnically Jewish, but how easily church folk can slip into this same sinful reliance on our proximity to the things of God! People who participate in the life of the church today have an analogous access to God's word, we've been taught standards of morality, we can discern right from wrong in the things we see happening in the world around us. It would be so easy to make a system of salvation out of our biblical moralism. We might as well rewrite Paul's warning as if it was given to Christians today: *But if you call yourself a born-again Christian and are sure of your right standing with God because of a prayer you prayed, because of your strong emotions and the tears you cried in that conversion moment, your knowledge of the Bible, the moral positions you've taken from the Bible, the leadership role you've taken at church, the way you've led others to faith...*

Paul is going to continue to show what happens when you rely on these external activities, but first we need to see that just as much as he is speaking to the Jew, he is speaking a warning to the "insiders" of the church today. Your proximity to the things of God will not make you right with God.

In fact, reliance on our proximity to the things of God not only will *not save you*, but inevitably leads to hypocrisy that dishonors God and ruins our witness.

### III. Hypocrisy (2:21-24)

So let's return to Paul's flow of thought. He's said if you call yourself a Jew and have all these external markers of your closeness to God and teach others about God, <sup>21</sup> you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself?

#### Hearers and Doers

Paul is saying, first of all, that a mere knowledge of God's existence and his will is not enough to make you righteous. You cannot simply be a hearer of the law. It's like what he said back in 2:13, "It is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who are justified."

How many of us, if we are followers of Jesus, open up our Bibles and read words, think about the meaning of sentences, make observations, chase down theological rabbit holes, write down interesting little nuggets, even feel our emotions lifted by our time in the word, but when we shut the book and go about the rest of our day it's might as well be as if we never read the word? The book of James says when we do that it's as if we looked at ourselves in a mirror and then, after turning away, we immediately forget what we look like.<sup>1</sup> God is not calling you to be someone who finds the Bible to be merely interesting. He's called us to regard the word of God as life-altering! Meaning, you literally alter your life in accordance with His Word. We are called to be doers of the word and not hearers only! We're called to practice what we preach, not to be hypocrites.

#### Law Breakers

But that's not the end of what Paul is getting at here. While you preach against stealing, do you steal?<sup>22</sup> You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? Now, Paul is not wondering whether or not they do these things. He's saying they *really are* guilty of these things. What kind of accusation is Paul making here? Is he saying that there is a gang of Jewish Christians in Rome who lead a double life of thievery and adultery? No. Paul's showing that Jesus has taught him how to understand God's law. You remember when Jesus taught about the law: "You've heard it said, 'do not commit adultery,' but I say to you anyone who looks at a person lustfully has committed adultery in his heart."<sup>2</sup> So first of all, you teacher of the law, you are putting confidence in your moral uprightness, but you don't understand that the obedience God requires is an obedience of the heart. Paul is saying, you think you keep the law, you think you are a doer of the law, but you are not. You've broken God's law - all of it - at a heart level.

When we break the law, we reveal the thing that we want more than God. This is why Paul makes one more accusation: "You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?" Now again, I don't think there was a temple-heist team in the Jewish community. What he means here is that when we break God's law in our hearts we are revealing a heart not devoted to God, but a heart given over to idolatry. He's saying, you are breaking God's command of practicing idolatry just as much as those who bow down

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<sup>1</sup> Ja 1:23-25.

<sup>2</sup> Mt 5:27-28

to statues in temples. You might as well steal a statue from a temple and give it the name and bow down to it, because that's what you're doing in your hearts.<sup>3</sup>

And when we break God's law in our heart, we do the very same thing that the pagans do. When Paul wrote in chapter one about the idolaters who don't even pretend to acknowledge God, he said in 1:21, "Although they knew God, they did not *honor* him as God..." and here in 2:23 he says, "You who boast in the law *dishonor* God by breaking the law."

### **The Dishonor of God**

Friends, the greatest issue in this whole discussion of our sin and God's judgment over the last few weeks is the dishonoring of God. The root of our sin and all the wrongness of the world is that we have dishonored God. He is infinitely worthy and in our sinful hypocrisy, we spit on the honor of God.

### **The Ruining of Our Witness**

And when we dishonor God with our hypocrisy we also discredit the name of God among the nations.<sup>24</sup> For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

We see this in real life today, don't we? How many people do you know who have rejected God because his people have not practiced what they preach in the ugliest ways? Our minds go to the scandals - pastors who fail, denominations that cover up. And they should go to those things. They are abominable.

But what about all the everyday ways we commit hypocrisy? What about when we love the theory of Christianity without internal application? And we savor the concepts, but are never changed by them? What about when we allow pride to take root in us because of our spiritual achievements and we look down on those who struggle spiritually? Or when we take our knowledge of biblical morality and allow it to puff us up with arrogance toward the world that does not know its left hand from its right and we are cold and condemning toward those who are sheep without a shepherd? What about when the whole of your life with God can be seen by others because the things done in public are done well, but they are just an empty shell covering up an empty, dusty, neglected inner relationship? When there is no hidden life with God, only that which is done for others to see? What about that kind of dead orthodoxy and hypocrisy?

Jesus said, "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and plate, that the outside also may be clean..." You are like whitewashed tombs Outwardly beautiful. Inwardly dead.<sup>4</sup>

## **IV. A Heart Alive to God (2:25-29)**

So when we rely on our proximity to the things of God for our righteousness it will fail us; and it will lead to hypocrisy that dishonors God and ruins our witness. So if we cannot rely on our works. If we

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<sup>3</sup> Keller, 57

<sup>4</sup> Mt 23:25-28

cannot rely on the law. If we cannot rely on the strength of our obedience... then what can we rely on?

In verse 25-29 Paul brings up circumcision; and if you don't know what circumcision is then it might feel like it's coming out of left field! But for Paul and for Jewish people circumcision is the sign of the covenant that God gave to Abraham to mark out his people. So Paul is using circumcision as shorthand for belonging to God and obeying God's law. And in talking about circumcision Paul makes up a man who isn't circumcised, but obeys the law in order to make the point that it is better to be inwardly alive to God without the outward sign, than to be outwardly alive, but inwardly dead.

So how can we become inwardly alive? I better not give you a prayer to pray or a habit to implement right now because Paul has hammered home that it's not our works that make us righteous. So how can we get a heart that is alive to God? Look at verse 28-29. <sup>28</sup> For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. <sup>29</sup> But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter...

So circumcision - belonging to God and being right with God - doesn't come by the letter of the law. Who does it come by? The Spirit. **Which means that the only thing we can rely on to make us right with God, is God.** In our hypocrisy, we depend on our proximity to God, on our works for God. But for a heart truly alive to God, the kind of heart that shows that we really belong to God, we can only rely on the Spirit. Which means that from beginning to end, the change that we need, the belonging we need, the obedience we need depends not on our own strength, but on God and his mercy.

This is something that cannot be applied externally. We can't do it ourselves. So who will save us?

## V. Conclusion

Believe it or not, it's worth thinking more about circumcision. God gave Abraham this outward sign of an inward reality which was that Abraham and his descendants had a personal, intimate relationship with God. But why was the outward sign circumcision?

Well in ancient times when a covenant was made, you sealed the promise by acting out the penalty for breaking it. So you might cut an animal in half and walk between the pieces to say: if I break my promise, let what has been done to this animal be done to me. (You can see this happening in Genesis 15.) In circumcision, there is a bloody severing that takes place in an intimate, personal part of the body that contributes to creating new life. So in making circumcision the sign of their covenant, God is telling Abraham and everyone else that breaking the covenant will lead to a cutting off from relationship with God, a cutting off from others, a cutting off from life itself.

Now here in Romans, Paul has been showing that everyone deserves to be cut off because no one has kept God's law. No one has held up their end of the bargain with their Creator. So how can anyone be right with God? **We can only be right with God because the cutting off we deserve has already happened.** In Colossians 2, Paul writes to a group of uncircumcised gentiles as he

teaches them about the cross of Jesus Christ saying, “<sup>11</sup> In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands...by the circumcision of Christ...<sup>13</sup> And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him...” (2:11 & 13). What that means is that if you are in Christ, the cutting off that you deserve has been done to Christ. Jesus was cut off at the cross. Everything circumcision symbolized was done in full to him. He has borne the penalty. He was cut off for the sins of religious hypocrites and godless idolaters alike.

So if you're beginning to see the utter weakness of your own efforts to be truly righteous, Christian or not, the application is the same. You have to let go of your hypocrisy and self-reliance and place all your faith in the One who was cut off for you. The only way you can be saved is for God to apply the “circumcision” of Christ at the cross to you. It is not our works; it is the grace of God. And when you confess your sin and put your faith in Christ the Father no longer sees a law breaker deserving of condemnation, but a covenant keeper worthy of praise. This is the meaning of verse 29. The Father will see you as praiseworthy in Jesus.

The outward works of religion - the letter of the law will fail us and condemn us to judgment. **Only faith that works its way from the inside out can make us right with God.** And the only way for our hearts to be made new and alive to God is by Another taking the curse for us. We can rely on no one but God to save us. And through the sacrifice of the Son and the power of the Spirit, God has made salvation available to you.