

All right. Let's open our Bibles tonight to Romans 2:17 as we continue this trek through Paul's theological masterpiece, I think, well, certainly one of the most, to me the best book on salvation that there is in the Scriptures.

Paul was on his third missionary journey going to Jerusalem with a lot of Gentile pastors who had money in their pockets to bring to the poor in Jerusalem. They wanted to reach out to their brethren, the Jewish believers. And Paul would spend three months here in Corinth on the way. He didn't want to miss the holiday - the feast day - but he did apparently get some things together, and while he was there, he wrote a letter of recommendation for a sister in the Lord there named Phoebe, who was going to Rome. She needed introduction to the church that she was a believer and she could be counted upon, that she was one in the faith, I guess. Paul had never been there, but he knew Aquila and Priscilla there as well as several others, and so he obliges her and writes what turns out to be chapter 16. But, as he began to write, Paul quickly got drawn by the Holy Spirit into what has to be one of the greatest works, like I said, about salvation as Paul delineates, very clearly, man and his sin and God's solution by His Son, through grace, and then God's promise to change us, to sanctify us, to set us apart.

And it's a lot of work. Theological books tend to take a little bit more thought. It's a little easier to go through narratives. The New Testament gospels are narrative; the historical books of the Old Testament are narrative. So you get to read stories and put yourself in them and try to imagine what you might have done or what the Lord would want you to do. But theology is more like doctrinal truths that you have to kind of stamp and think through, and so I'm glad that you're working your way through it.

Paul's intent is very clear. He wants to be sure that everyone who listens to him is convinced that they're sinners. It doesn't really matter if you're the perverted lifestyle person who lives out there in Rome in the streets of idolatry, or you're the upstanding businessman or father, husband at home who seems to have a good commitment in his life to his family and has a moral base, or whether you're a priest or a very religious person. It really doesn't matter. But he wants to convince everyone that they have the same need. In fact, Paul spends sixteen

verses of chapter 1 explaining why he is doing what he's doing, why the Lord called him, what his passion is for the souls of men. He usually doesn't write this long, but he does this time because they've never met him. But even in verses 16 and 17 of chapter 1, Paul gives you the first hint, if you will, of salvation when he said he wasn't ashamed of the gospel of Christ. It's God's power unto salvation to everyone who believes. And then he says through the gospel, God's righteousness is revealed from faith to faith because the just have to live by faith. In other words, there's no way to be right with God through what you're going to do or have done because ever since God has made Himself known, those who stand before God justified have to do so based on their trust in Him rather than in the confidence in themselves.

And then beginning in verse 18 of chapter 1, Paul goes after sin, and he begins to define sin and its consequences to say that God is angry with man and his sin; that God has made known to us what can be known of Him, both in our conscience - that which God has put within us, and in creation - what God has created around us. And so that when we turn away from those indicators, we willfully set down on the truth, suppress the truth. We don't want to hear it. And whether you're an abject sinner, as chapter 1 describes - as sin kind of runs its course to the end, or whether you're a respectable sinner - as chapter 2 describes, or whether you're a religious guy - as he's going to talk about tonight, it doesn't really matter. You're still under the wrath of God because what God has let us know about Him; if we believe the revelation, we will humble ourselves and receive His message and turn to His Son and be saved. There's really no excuse. You can't get off the hook. But because man is who man is, there's always this strategy of layering sin - real bad, not so bad, kind of bad, not really bad at all anymore - as the cultures change, and we lose sight of the fact that God is holy. Man's not. Man is in big trouble without God's help. And no matter where you are tonight, without Jesus you're in big trouble because there's no way in apart from His saving grace. And that's always been the case. The just have always had to live by faith.

And so Paul, in chapter 1, especially down through verse 32 or so, writes out the progress of sin, how that God lets Himself be known, how that man doesn't want to listen to the Lord and respond to what he has learned of Him - that the invisible things of God can be seen and be understood. And so, not wanting to glorify the Lord, even though they could know God, they turned away. And by turning away, you're left with nothing. If the light is not what you want, then you head for darkness. Your mind becomes dark, your outlook becomes dark, your thoughts become futile. There's a darkness around your heart. You think that you're wise,

but you're a fool, and then you'll find yourself one day standing before God without any hope. Because that's how sin works. It's not satisfied with ruining you; it wants to absolutely crush you. And so Paul carries that forward to say if that is the path you're on, eventually you exchange the truth of God for a lie, you begin to worship the creature rather than the Creator, and you begin to involve yourself with very perverted ways of life that you think are just fine. And even if you think they're not so fine, you're happy to watch other people engage themselves in them. That's the downfall of sin. In fact, that kind of lifestyle is usually at the end of a culture before it falls. You found it in Greece, you found it in the Roman culture, you may very well find it in America one day. If that continues, what you see and the perversion that follows is usually the last step is God gives you over to that kind of lifestyle. But that's not God's will. That's just how sin progresses. And that's not true in everyone's life. Sometimes we stop with morality and say, "Well, we're all right," and we get lost there. But lost we still are.

And that's certainly the case in chapter 2 as we started. There is a respectable sinner category who hears of the perversions where sin can lead, and he sees himself as above that kind of wickedness. So all of a sudden I'm not quite the sinner of chapter 1. And in chapter 2, we looked at six different principles, over the last few weeks, of how God will one day judge. And we said, in verse 2, it would be "according to the truth" because He knows everything about us; that it follows a lifetime of accumulated debt and guilt. In other words, you think you're getting away with it, but God's just being patient. But if you don't come to Him, you get the full reward for that faithless life, if you will, and the judgment will be so. It will be, in verse 6, "according to works." It'll come forth "without," verse 11, "a respect of persons." It'll be based on your knowledge of what you should be doing and your understanding. God knows that, too. You can't say, "I didn't know." The Lord says, "Of course you knew." And that will be the judgment. It will be based on complete information, and God will reveal our hearts.

And tonight, just from verse 17 to the end of the chapter, we're going to look at just one more issue. You can't even get into category 3 on the religious guy, and because of my religion or my place, I have an advantage with God in the sense that I don't need what you need. I don't need a Savior. I don't need repentance. Look what I've done. It should be evidenced by now, from our earlier studies, that from God's point of view, there is no achievement on your level or no personal opinion about yourself or even claims about your righteousness that will help you escape the conclusion that we must all come to, that we're going to have to answer to the

Lord for our sins. And to the extent of how much sin, that's almost incidental. It almost doesn't factor in. Sin is sin. Right? Sin brings judgment. Sin brings death. We are all sinners. And we're good at making distinctions, especially if they are to our advantage - the self-serving excuses, the moralist of chapter 2, let's say, who separates himself from the perversions of chapter 1. But at the end of the day, and at the end of this chapter, Paul will tackle this idea of, beginning in verse 17, "Indeed you are called a Jew." So now Paul turns to that audience because that's a big audience in his life. He was sent to the Gentiles, but his heart was for the people of Israel, certainly. He said he would trade in his salvation for theirs (Romans 9:3-5). That's the kind of love he had for them. So you can read verse 17 and start with the words, "You are called a Jew." That could easily read, "You are called a fundamentalist. You're a church-going Protestant. You are a real spiritual individual. You are a moral being." And you would have the same argument, and it would lead to the same wrong conclusion because you would still need a Savior.

Most folks understandably long for security in the things that they're involved with: marriage, business, health, economics. And every man desires a knowledge of spiritual eternity if it exists. The Bible says that God created us, Ecclesiastes 3:11, with eternity in our hearts. So man can't shake that thought. There's an eternity that I'm going to have to deal with. And because he hopes there isn't one, and yet it gnaws at him that there might very well be one, in the hopes of escaping judgment, many folks will turn in their spiritual insecurity to a religion because somehow that brings peace to me and rest. Now, it covers up the issue that man is sinful and needs a Savior. But no doubt the hardest person to reach is a religious person because he finds that there's nobody so bad that Jesus can't reach them. But there are millions of people who think they're too good to be reached by the Lord, and so they find that separation, and they turn to a religious way. Yet from what the Lord tells us here, even a divinely-revealed religion, if you will, or God's religion or God's people's practices of religion that point to the Savior, even Judaism provides no security if it is followed by someone even meticulously devoid of the reality of obedience and faith and repentance and turning to the Lord to convict them of their sin and their need for a Savior.

Paul, here, speaks specifically to the Jews. He's Jewish. That's where his heart is. That's what.....he deals with that a lot on his trips around, as you would say. But what he says would certainly apply to those who think that they're right with God because they go to a church or they attend a temple or they go to a mosque or they have a Bible or they've read the Koran or, if you will, in our culture, if you're

simply an American, you must be a Christian. And so that's the mentality. We've gone from the perversion of chapter 1 to the moral guy who gets high fives from everyone around him in chapter 2 to the devout religious guy who thinks that somehow there's separation between him and everyone else. "I've been baptized, I've been confirmed, I go to church, I serve there, they know my name, I give tithes." Whatever it might be. And here I find myself no longer moved by my need for salvation because I have a religion and a church membership, and I have the sacraments, and I'm involved in the activities. And we miss the fact that we need a new heart. We need salvation. Our core is sinful. And whatever substitutes itself for faith in Christ - because the just have always had to live by faith (chapter 1:16-17), they've always had to - then you're missing the one hope that you can have, in Christ.

It was the LORD who said to Samuel, as Samuel was out hunting for that new replacement for Saul when he had gone to David's home, and the LORD said to Samuel (1 Samuel 16:7), "You look at his appearance. God looks at the heart." Because he went after a guy that was, first of all, a real tall lookin' guy. Right? He looked stately, he looked presidential, "kingish," if you will. That didn't work. And then he went after David who was kind of a red-headed but a good-looking kid. And the LORD just said, "I'm lookin' at the heart. And so pick this guy because his heart is right with God." And that becomes the issue.

Remember, Jesus said, right at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not....?' " and then listing a whole bunch of things they did. " 'Didn't we prophesy in your name, cast out demons in your name, done many wonderful works in your name?' " Now those sound pretty powerful. And yet the Lord said, "Even with all of that, I don't know you. And I will declare to them I never knew you. Depart from Me because you're practicing lawlessness!" Sinfulness. "You've never dealt with the issue of sin."

So wherever you stand - real horrible, sort of horrible, real religiously not very horrible - you're still horrible. Right? We still need a Savior who has come for us. And it may be difficult to conceive of earnest, sincere, religious people being lost, but that's exactly what Jesus said and what Paul addresses. That that's not enough. Sin is a heart issue, and God has sent His Son to pay the price for our sin.

So we read, in verse 17, "Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are

excellent, 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, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law." Now they make four claims. And Paul's talking to the Jews now because he's applying this in a way that we can all receive it. There are four claims of spiritual advantage with God: God has given to you, the Jew, the laws; you have a special relationship with God; you know His will because you have His law; and, as such, you can approve only the most excellent human moral standards. You have a compass to go by. Four spiritual advantages. And then four privileges that those advantages bring them, here in these verses: you can now be a guide to the blind; you can be a light to those who are sitting in darkness; you can be an instructor to the foolish; and you can be a teacher to babes, those who need to know.

As far as that goes, each of those claims is basically true. The Jews did have that position. In chapter 3, at least the first twenty verses or so (we'll talk more about that before we get to my favorite part of the book, at least early on, beginning in verse 21 of chapter 3; we'll get to that down the road here in a few weeks, if you will), some may view this as spiritual arrogance or prejudice, if you will, believing no religion has any special claim to the truth. But that's not true. The Jews do have a special claim to the truth. They received the law of God directly from Moses, through a long succession of prophets, generals, kings, chroniclers. God spoke to the Jews. He gave the Jews the law. Now we're supposed to have it, too, but it was first given to them. So you are ever reading, "For the Jew first and then to the Gentiles." God entered a special relationship with the Jews, and by a covenant with Abraham onward, that was clearly established in the Bible. God made sure everyone knew that was His covenant with them, not with anybody else. But with them. If you look at Jesus' conversation with that woman at the well, there in John 4, she asked.....she actually was, I think, trying to divert the light that was upon her.....but regardless, she asked the Lord how worship should be conducted. Here or in Jerusalem? What's the scoop? And Jesus said, "You worship what you don't know, but we worship what we do know. Salvation is of the Jews." God did pick a people through whom He would let the world know. So they were, in positional standing, in a good place. The Jew could know God's will because he had God's law, and Paul will reference knowing God's will by the law in terms of behavior next, by starting to quote the Ten Commandments to them and saying, "All right. You know it, now you're on the hook for it. Here's your advantage, and it just puts you in a worse place as far as guilt and conviction." And he'll bring that up in a few verses.

Both Jews and Christians view the Old Testament as the Word of God, not of human flesh. Right? We both agree this was God-breathed, this was given by the Lord. 2 Peter 1:21, "For prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." We believe that. God gave to them the care for the Word of God. These apocryphal books that so often are added by different denominations to your Bible.....maybe you've seen some of these apocryphal books. They're not very reliable historically. They develop a lot of false doctrine. But maybe more than anything else, the Jews rejected them. They embraced what God gave them. God gave them as a steward to take care of His Word. So they're in a great place.

And finally, by having and knowing the law, he could (a Jew could) approve those things that were excellent. In other words, he had the ultimate yardstick. This is what God would want. No other measurements would be necessary, so the privilege was his. But with privilege comes responsibility and accountability. And Paul, as he writes, will point out, in his discussion with us about religion, that having and knowing privilege and advantage are of no consequence except in a negative sense, if all you've done is you've taken your religion and not allowed it to change your life. In other words, you haven't internalized God's promises or, if you will, you don't believe it enough to follow it.

I would say the same thing to you tonight, and maybe I'm singing to the choir because you're here on a night that most people are not going to church because it's just a busy week between Christmas and New Year. But you're here because you want to hear from the Lord. But if you put this Bible down every week in your trunk and just go, "Now that was.....did you hear that funny story he told? That was pretty funny." Or, "We sang that song. I love that song when we sing that song. That's my favorite song." And that's all that happens to you? You've given up your advantage of being a believer. You have God's Word. You have God's promise. You've got His Spirit. You have lots of assurances. But if you're not grabbing on to those things, then you're not being the just that lives by faith; you're just another religious person doing religious things that the world may applaud, and you may feel good about, but it doesn't accomplish your salvation. And that's Paul's argument. And I think that's the argument that you would probably like to present to a lot of your friends who live good lives, who are very kind people, who just seem to be at the end of that rope that you can't reel in because they're very proud of themselves, and everyone around is applauding their behavior. But yet it's still the

issue, isn't it? Without a life-changing heart relationship with Jesus Christ, you're not going to make it.

In fact, the term "Jew".....the word "Jew" means "praise Jehovah." That's what it translates to be. We are worshippers of God. And few people are more orthodox than Paul in his lifestyle, in his religion. He said, there in Acts 26:5&9, "They knew me from the first.....that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee. And I did everything I could contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. I lived and devoted myself to this religious way. Everything I could do." And yet he made himself an enemy of Christ.

So, look, in one sentence here, I guess, literally, Paul sets out the overconfidence of the religious: we're Jews, we possess the law, we can brag about God, we pride ourselves in our knowledge, we have great privilege and position, we have access, we have history, we have a Bible, we have an Old Testament written all about us and our relationship with God. And Paul said it doesn't do you any good if you're not walking with God, if it doesn't accomplish in you what needs to happen, which is back in chapter 1:17, the just have to live by faith in Christ. That's where...you've got to get there. Anything else is a roadblock that's a lie of the enemy that's going to keep you from eternal life.

They viewed their gifts as a gift of merit. They responded to them with pride and with superiority. They boast in their position. The Gentiles were dogs. "We're the chosen, you're not." The Minor Prophets constantly warned the nation of Israel about that kind of arrogance. Micah would write in chapter 3:11-12, "Your leaders judge for a bribe, your teachers will only teach for pay, your prophets come out to prophesy for money. They don't lean on the LORD. They don't say, 'Is the LORD among us? No harm can come upon us.' But I'm telling you what, Zion is going to become plowed like a field, and Jerusalem like a heap of ruins, and the temple like a mountain that's been knocked down because you are in a position to know God, and you decided not to know Him." So he speaks against that pride that comes from position.

Even politically there was that blinding, that conversation, there in John 8, where Jesus was confronted with a bunch of Jewish leaders, if you will, and they began to ask Him about who He was. And Jesus began to tell them. And finally, there in John 8:31, Jesus said, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." And they said this,

"We're Jews. We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. What are You talking about?" Well, they were absolutely under the bondage of Rome. They couldn't do anything they wanted, man. They were governed by and overseen by a foreign power. "So how can You tell us that You can make us free?" And Jesus said, "If you're a sinner, you're a slave to sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed." ("If you're My child, you'll be free. I can make you free. Spiritually. Eternally.") "I know that you are Abraham's descendants, but you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you." Pretty big confrontation for guys that started off by saying....in fact, chapter 8:30 says, "When they heard His Word, they believed in Him." That's exactly what it says. And then they made sure that you knew that their belief was not at all faith, and they began to argue with Jesus, and they said, "We belong to Abraham!" Verse 38, "I'm telling you what the Father has shown Me, but you're telling Me what you've heard from your father." "We're Abraham's. Abraham's our father." And Jesus said, "If Abraham was your father, you'd listen to My Word. But here you are trying to kill Me, the One who's just told you the truth. That Abraham would never have done. You do the deeds of your father," speaking of the devil. And then they got really mad, and they said, "Well, at least we weren't born out of wedlock like You! Born of fornication." That's what they said. They just threw it in Jesus' face. The guys in verse 30 said they were believing in Him. "If God were your Father, you would love Me, and you would come forth, and you would be with Me, and I would come to you, and you would know Me." But they just got angrier and angrier, and they said, "See? You have a demon, man. You're a Samaritan!" "I don't have any of those things!" So they had this horrible argument, and Jesus finally said, "If I honor Myself, my honor is nothing. But if My Father glorifies Me, of whom you say that He is your God, then you should know that I know Him. And if I didn't know Him, then I would be a liar like you. But I do know Him, and I've kept His Word. And your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day. He saw it." And they said, "Well, wait a minute. You're not even fifty years old." To be honest with you, Jesus was barely thirty, so I think this life was pretty hard on Him. "You're not even fifty years old, and you said You've seen Abraham." And Jesus said, "Before Abraham was, I AM." "*Ego eimi*." It's a word that John uses seven times, the great I AMs of Jesus. "I AM WHO I AM, and you can believe in Me if you want." And then they took up stones and tried to kill Him. These were the religious folks who said they believed in Him. But He didn't fit into their box, and it certainly resulted in this pride and arrogance and superiority.

And verse 17 and verse 18 would say there is a distinct advantage to being a Jew: born Hebrew, born with a language of the Scriptures, able to know the Scriptures from a childhood, if you will, aware of the fact that there needed to be sacrifice for sin. You were filled with that understanding when you were a kid. If you lived in a Jewish household, you had to go make sacrifices so you could get close to God. That whole picture was pressed into the life and into the nation for generations. I always have thought.....I grew up Catholic. I went to Catholic high school and grade school, and it seems to me, over the years, when we ask people.....can I ask how many of you are ex-Catholics? Just for fun. Look around. (Many hands are raised.) And I think the reason is you grew up with the right Jesus. Oh, He's buried under the saints and Mariology and a lot of church issues, but He's the right Jesus. He's the One who was born of a virgin and died for our sins and rose on the third day. If you were born in a Jehovah Witness house or in a Mormon household, you have to change your whole concept of who Jesus is, which makes it more difficult. But Catholics have grown up with the right Jesus. He just needs to get uncovered which is why, every time I ask, it's usually 50 or 60 or 70% of the church somehow came out of the Catholic church. The Jews had that kind of an advantage, though. They knew, and they could have known.

But I'll tell you what. It is only an advantage to you if you take what God has given you and begin to follow Him. And that's the issue. This is no trivial matter, if you will. The Jews lived in an era of extreme paganism. Idolatry was on every corner. Everyone had a hundred different gods. There was superstition and adultery and lots of awful things that went along with it. But the Jew was given great advantage.

He saw himself, verse 19 and verse 20, as a teacher of others, but he was very contemptuous of others. He, in his pride, scorned the ignorance of others. By the way, the word for "foolish" here, "instructor of the foolish," is the Greek word for "stupid." Straightforward. That's exactly what it says. A look with disdain at the Gentile neighbors for their ignorance. Look, there're a lot of people today who consider themselves safe from God's judgment because they've been baptized, because they go to church, because they come from a Christian family or they made some profession of faith a long time ago. That's no assurance if you're not hangin' on to Jesus. Because He's the hope, and "God's wrath is revealed from heaven against ungodliness and unrighteousness" and people who think they have it figured out. The Jew who actually has both advantage and privilege could not stand on them alone because both of them would point them to the need of a

Savior. That should be the conclusion of his religious ways. To those who hang on to their history, to their religious works, or their supposed advantages, and yet all the time not develop a personal relationship with God by faith in His Son, are deceived, I think, and in danger of God's judgment.

So, verse 21, "You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, 'Do not commit adultery,' do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? For 'the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,' as it is written." There is tremendous condemnation for mere head knowledge of the truth when it's divorced from the life that it's supposed to create. People are quick to condemn that, and they should be. Right? All talk, no walk. All walk...the common fault of people studying for others but never applying the Scriptures to themselves. I sometimes hear people come up after church on a Sunday, and they'll go, "Oh, I wish my Uncle so-and-so was here, he needed that." How 'bout you? What was God saying to you? "Well, He was telling me I should give that to my Uncle." (Laughing) That's listening for somebody else, isn't it?

So Paul, here, takes on the religious man. Look, you can go on your computer tonight and read the Bible in twenty-five different translations. You want to find a verse on any subject, you just push "Search." It takes three seconds. It takes less time. The arrogant presumption of religion is that you can have a relationship with yourself, standing before God, and yet have to pay a price in the long run because, as the Lord says, if you claim the knowledge, then you have to live with what you claimed. You have to put into practice what you've learned.

Jesus, here, remember He tells that parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, and He introduces it with the words, "This is a parable of someone who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, but they despised others" (Luke 18:9). That's the story. And the Pharisee goes into the Temple, and he won't stand next to the poor guy beating his breast, who won't look up. But he starts to talk to himself, "I thank You, Lord, that I'm not like that guy; that I give of all that I have, and I follow the law, and I'm great." He's breaking his arm, patting himself on the back. And then the Lord said, when he's done, "Here's a guy who prayed with himself." God wasn't listening. It was the humble man, aware of his sin, that finds he has a place with God.

Our familiarity with holy things must never give way to spiritual presumption. So Paul asks these questions to, I think, confront presumption. For example, verse 21, spiritual insincerity. If it doesn't touch your life, how can God use you to touch the life of others? How can you teach someone what you haven't learned? How can you pass along or preach what you're not doing? There's a conflict there. It doesn't mean we're going to make it right all the time because then none of us could ever open our mouths. But, look, not stealing is a generally accepted standard of human behavior that is often broken, and somehow that's okay. Now they owe it to you. You've got to practice what you preach. Because to not do that is to expose your sin and your need for a Savior. "Well, I've never broken into a house." Well, how 'bout being on the clock at work and sitting on your computer going through Facebook, sending personal messages, extending your lunch hour, wasting company time for personal projects, borrowing something and never returning it? There're a lot of ways to be a thief if that's what you.....because that's our sinfulness.

Isaiah applied it to himself. If you read in chapter 5 of Isaiah, when the king dies, King Uzziah dies, and he sees the LORD high and lifted up, the LORD delivers six woes (in chapter 5) through the prophet to the people in their sin. Then in chapter 6, when the king dies, and he sees the LORD clearly, for maybe the first time in his life, Isaiah, he takes those very same six woes, and he applies them to himself. No longer just preaching to others, he's now preaching to himself, and it changes the way that he goes about living. Isaiah was open to let God speak to his heart as he ministered to others.

But, look, this is spiritual insincerity, isn't it? Verse 21. You're preaching to others, but you're really not doing what you say. And nobody likes that.

In verse 22, there's this spiritual insensitivity. You can't preach the law and then live a lie. That's true of adultery or sexual sin. Jesus was quick to help everyone. He said (Matthew 5), "If you look with lust in your heart, you've already committed adultery. If you hate in your heart, you've already committed murder." The key, of course, is it's a heart issue. You need God's salvation. And it's the same message over and over again. Religion can bring an advantage and a privilege, but religion can't save you. Jesus saves you. And if you have Jesus, then your practice of religion can be very joyful. Now you can come and raise your hands and worship, but you're doing it because of a love for the Lord; you're not doing it to appease the Lord or somehow to feel righteous with God. If you're in church tonight just because "I'll feel better if I go to church," eh, you should be here because the

Lord is the One that you want to worship and look to and learn from, and He'll bless you here.

There's this spiritual insincerity, there's this spiritual insensitivity, and then, in verse 23 and verse 24, there's this spiritual insolvency, if you will, boasting in the law and yet breaking it while thinking you can walk by a different set of rules than anyone else. That's far from an asset. The Jews' access to the truth became a liability because they became accountable to God. The Bible said....they could quote to you what the Scriptures said. And they should walk with it. There's nothing that will turn a stranger away from the truth faster than the misbehavior of someone who professes to know God. We hate all that. That's hypocrisy. We see it in politics all the time. Everybody hates it. Congress doesn't get a 10% approval rating for nothing. They earned it.

Abraham, in Egypt (Genesis 12) with his wife, stopped being a blessing when he was lying to the Pharaoh, and he became a source of cursing, and it was difficult. Right? David became a stumbling block in his behavior, too, when he was found out with his whole sin with Bathsheba. The prophet said to him (2 Samuel 12:13-14), "God is not going to kill you. You're going to beat that. The LORD's going to take care of you, but because of your deed, you've given the enemy great opportunity to blaspheme the LORD." And he said, "For the child, he's going to die so that God can stop that and they can realize that God is a holy God." Paul quotes this very verse (in verse 24) from 2 Samuel 12, that verse there, verse 24. Ezekiel spelled the same thing out as well. In chapter 36, he goes through this whole thing about how the land of Israel had profaned the land, and God's name was being profaned, and so the LORD said, "I'm taking you out of the land. In fact, I'm destroying the land so My name won't be destroyed. I'm not doing this for your sake, I'm doing this for Mine. First and foremost, I have a reputation to uphold."

Mere orthodoxy - orthodoxy, by definition, is religious practices or a system of religious beliefs; orthodoxy, just means practice, right? - doesn't make you acceptable with God. It'll impress men but not for long because they look for reality, not duplicity. But a person's access to the truth only increases his accountability to the truth. We cannot change the heart any more than a leopard can change his spots (Jeremiah 13:23). We are sinners, and we need help.

So, when we get to verse 25, Paul then drives it home with an example about religious practices. He says, in verse 25, "For circumcision is indeed profitable if

you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you who, even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God." So Paul goes out of his way now to go these religious self-satisfied folks, and he says, "There's only a limited value to ritual, and the limited value is when it attaches itself to reality and to relationship." The religious person usually feels that he has a special place or a standing with God because he follows his orthodoxy with an intellectual assent. "I'm going to baptize my baby, I'm going to have communion, I'm going to show up at church...on Easter or at Christmas." Right? But because he somehow feels more scrupulous in keeping the ordinances or the rites or the rituals of his religious demands, he finds himself more unique and more confident. And that certainly was the case for the Jews. They took great pride in their orthodoxy, in their practices.

But notice, in verses 25 and 26 and 27, that the Lord says there is a limited value to them. Even a divinely-authorized ritual - not one man made up but one that God gave; this one came from the Lord; circumcision was God's idea - only has value in as much as it is an outward expression of an internal relationship with God, else it is of no value at all. No outward ceremony has value if it's divorced from the intimate, personal, dynamic, spiritual experience that you have with God. And that's the rub. Even the rite of circumcision, which God has ordained for His people, has value only in the life of one surrendered to the Lord in faith already. And Paul will go out of his way to say that about Abraham in chapter 4. He'll say he was right with God before he was circumcised, and so this was a verification of his relationship with God. But other than that, it would have been of no consequence. Circumcision, once given to Abraham, was a beautiful kind of public demonstration or testimony of his commitment to the LORD. Paul will say, in Romans 4:11, "He received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised." The door was opened for everyone. But the reality of the circumcision was a life that would now be not governed by the flesh but governed by the Lord.

So the value of a divinely-authorized ritual is not only related to the law of God but also to the light of the person who follows God's law. To flout the Word of God....you can almost negate the ritual. If you have a relationship with God, the ritual falls in line beneath your relationship with God; it doesn't exalt itself above it. Right? The most important thing is your walk with the Lord. There's nothing mechanical, automatic or superficial about your relationship with the Lord tonight. No ceremony can make up for what is deficient in your personal relationship with God. It won't help you. Right?

And to the word "circumcision," in these verses, you could add words that we might use like "baptism." Right? That won't help you. "I'm a Presbyterian. I'm a Methodist. I'm a Calvary Chapel guy. I take communion. I dedicated my child." "Are you a believer?" "Well, I'm a Catholic." I said that for a lot of years. "And I've been baptized, and I went to confession. And I've been confirmed, and I took communion." And I didn't know the Lord. I didn't know the Lord. But I did all that stuff, and I was assured by everyone around me, "That's it. You're good. You're in good shape." Until I met the Lord.

Verse 28 and verse 29, God looks at the limitless value of the reality of a relationship with God. And notice Paul goes right to the heart of the matter. Right? God is never fooled. We have to love God first. If we love God first, then everything else will fall in line. If we love the Lord first. Moses said, in Deuteronomy 30:6 to the people, "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." Paul wrote to the Colossians this, "For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power. In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ" (Colossians 2:9-11). That's the issue. You see, when the ritual reflects the reality, then the ritual has value. But to try to take confidence in the ritual without a relationship with God hides the fact that you're a sinner who needs salvation. And so even the religion now begins to mislead you, if you will, or misguide you. This isn't a new idea. Right? This idea that the pure act of circumcision means anything was pointed out constantly in the Scriptures.

It's interesting....when you get towards Easter every year, we have Fat Tuesday. I don't know if you've ever been to Mardi Gras. I remember going there as a kid

before I was a Christian, before I was a believer. But Fat Tuesday was the day where you could just excessively do whatever it is that you did because come tomorrow, you're giving up everything - no drinkin', no partyin', no whatever it is that you like to do. For Lent, you set aside what you indulge in so that it can lead you up to Good Friday, and then, all right, and then you can go back to your old way of life, I guess. But God sees behind the mask.

So knowledge and advantage and privilege are not enough to get God's approval. Membership in a religious community - whether it's the covenant nation of Israel or a visible religious organization - will never get God's favor. The sacraments, the religious rituals save nobody. God judges, according to the truth, the heart. That's all that He cares about. So whether you're a chapter 1 perverted sinner or a chapter 2 moral sinner or, at the end of chapter 2 and then the beginning of chapter 3, a very religious person, we need help. We need a Savior, and God would like to convince you, you shouldn't hang on to your religion. You've got to hang on to a Person. You've got to hang on to Christ. And that's why we have communion. Right? So we can celebrate what He has done for us. Amen?

Good last Wednesday message before we start a new year. Let's pray together and have communion. Shall we?

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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