

# Even The Religious Need The Gospel, Part 2<sup>1</sup>

Romans 2:17-29

**Call:** Ps 67:1-5 (NIV)

**Scripture:** Matt 7:1-5 (NIV)

## I. Introduction

### A. Introduction

Good morning! We enter back into Romans this morning where our text today is a continuation of last week's text. So, we're going to stare at our sin straight in the face again this week.

What comes to mind when you hear that Scripture reading about specks and planks? The text is from Jesus' sermon on the mount, "*Do not judge... Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?*" (Matt 7:1,3). For one thing, I think it proves that Jesus had a sense of humor. I think this should make us laugh shouldn't it? The picture of a plank in someone's eye is supposed to be funny, isn't it?

But, what does Jesus mean by not judging? We make judgments all the time, what to wear, what to do, where to go. What does He mean by "*Do not judge.*" He means not looking down on someone with a superior attitude, not condemning someone or closing the book on someone as having no hope. As I said last week, I think this command is in Paul's mind as he is writing chapter 2 of Romans.

### B. Review

We pick up today with Paul in the middle of describing the universal brokenness of humanity, and the universal need for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So, at the end of chapter 1, Paul was unrelenting in listing the typical sins known mostly among unreligious Gentiles. Sins like sexual sin, greed, envy, gossip, no love, no mercy and haters of God, which have marred their image-of-Godness.

Then, at the beginning of chapter 2, Paul turns to the Jews who judgmentally look down on those bad Gentiles. In other words, he begins addressing those who consider themselves "religious." Even the religious need the Gospel.

Last week, we saw Paul begin a diatribe against a Jewish interlocutor, probably an imaginary person who represents an opposing point of view. This allows Paul to make his points while also making it quite personal to us. He continues this conversation with the interlocutor today.

So, I invite you into our text today, beginning in chapter 2, verse 17.

---

<sup>1</sup> Taken from Tim Keller, *Romans 1-7 For You* (New York: Good Books, 2014), 53.

## II. Condemning Pride (v 17-24)

*17 Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; 18 if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; 19 if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, 20 an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— 21 you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? 22 You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? 23 You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? 24 As it is written: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” (NIV)*

### A. Introduction

In many ways, these are remarkable verses from Paul. And, we have to remember that Paul is a Jew writing to his fellow Jews. He’s not an anti-semite, as some people take these verses. He is acting like an Old Testament prophet, calling out his own people for their unrighteousness, or in this case, their self-righteousness.

He calls out a “You,” this imaginary conversation partner, who just heard that list of Gentile sins, and wrote themselves out of the list. “You” think that just by being a Jew will protect “you” from God’s judgment. “You” think that because “you” have the title of God’s chosen people, “you” are superior to them. Take out the plank, Paul says.

### B. The Wisdom of Solomon

Here, it’s pretty clear that Paul is drawing his language from a popular, first century, Jewish text called the Wisdom of Solomon. In that text, there is broad criticism for Gentiles and their idolatrous way of life. But, when that text turns to the Jews, it overtly says they will be saved from God’s wrath because they have a special line to God, because they are God’s chosen people. Paul is clearly trying to obliterate that entire worldview here in Romans 2. The privileges of being a Jew or, of being a religious person, gives no one an advantage when it comes to God’s judgment.

### C. Introduction to the Advantages

This text contains fifteen elements, three sets of five, written with a tremendous rhetorical force by Paul, and ending with a quotation from the Old Testament. There are five elements speaking to the perceived advantages of the Jews, five elements speaking to the mission of the Jews and five questions.

Let’s walk through these lists, and explore what Paul means and explore what we can learn from them.

### D. Perceived Advantages

In verses 17-18, Paul lists five perceived advantages of the Jews.

- First of all, this person claims to be a *“Jew.”* Although being a Jew could be a geographical reference or political reference, Paul, here, clearly is referring to the religious reference, for this person who has the law of God.
- Secondly, this person claims to *“rely on that law.”* In other words, this person thinks by just having the law, they are secure from God’s judgment.
- Thirdly, this person *“boasts in God.”* Paul clearly says this in a negative sense that this person viewed themselves as God’s favorites, over and against the Gentiles.
- Fourthly, this person *“knows [God’s] will.”* Here Paul is probably criticizing the fact that the Jews know the will of God intellectually without doing it. He saw no obedience from the heart to the law.
- And, fifthly, this person *“approve[s] of what is superior.”* This person prides himself on knowing the good from the bad, and the bad from the good, unlike those Gentiles.

So, five perceived advantages that the Jews felt as God’s people. And, they are wonderful privileges, no doubt, but they ended up having two unintended consequences:

1. Building arrogance in them, making them feel superior to the theologically uneducated Gentiles, and
2. Making them feel like they were protected from any judgment from God.

Now, let’s be careful here. It’s so easy for us today to look at that list and easily see the Jew’s spiritual blindness. But, aren’t we the religious ones of our day? We’re the people of God now aren’t we? We love God, we love Jesus. We have the revealed Word of God. We know the truth. I mean, we have “Bible” in our name! Look at us! We’ve made it! And, all of a sudden, we’re full of pride and arrogance, which so easily translates into looking down on all those out there, even other denominations who don’t have Bible in their names. These are very convicting words for me.

But, Paul’s not done.

### **E. Mission of the Jews**

Paul now moves to a list of five characteristics speaking to the mission of the Jews, verses 19-20. A Jew was to be *“a guide to the blind,” “a light in the darkness,” “an instructor of the foolish,” “a teacher of infants”* all while *“holding the knowledge and truth of the law.”*

Now, it is true that the Jews were to do all of those things. They were the ones to teach and instruct the truth to those who had *“exchanged the truth of God for a lie,”* as Paul said about the Gentiles back in chapter 1. But, this mission of theirs had gone to their heads. Instead of humbly sharing the truth in love, they became arrogant and proud, becoming obnoxious and intolerant to the Gentiles. All it did was turn the Gentiles away from God. One writer writes, “The very privileges which should have produced saints produced arrogant, loveless egotists instead” (Hughes, 64).

Again, this is a great danger for the church today. We have the amazing truth of the Gospel! And, it's a great privilege to know this truth. And, Jesus instructed us to live it as salt and light. But, knowing it and living it should be done in humility and grace, not arrogance and pride.

It's the very thing Jesus spoke against in the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector, which goes like this:

*9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'*

*13 "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' 14 "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14).*

Working through this text reminded me of a story I heard years ago about a prostitute who went to a pastor for help. The lady was in bad shape. She was "homeless, sick, [and] unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter." After this lady had shared her heartbreaking story, the pastor asked her if she had ever considered going to a church for help. The pastor then said that the lady's face suddenly turned to pure shock. "Church!" she cried. "Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse." (Yancey, 11).

May that not be our church.

Once again, Mother Theresa's quote I shared last week comes to mind: "If you judge others, you have no time to love them" (Smith, 189). Love, seeking the best for the other, not judgment, is how people know we follow Jesus.

To be clear, what Paul means here is that we are not to condemn those who are struggling with those sins in chapter one. We are not to condemn those who are struggling with sexual sin, those who are greedy, those who are envious, those who gossip, those who show no love, those who show no mercy, even those who hate God.

I would probably add those who don't use their turn signals! Or, given where we are in the political cycle, those who belong to a different political party.

We all know people like this don't we? As followers of Jesus Christ, do we make those people "feel worse," to use the words from that prostitute? Or do they feel love from us?

Paul still not done.

## F. Five Questions

Next up, verses 21-23, Paul continues by summarizing his preceding statements with five rhetorical questions going back to the hypocrisy theme we talked about last week. Once again, they are piercing questions for all of us:

- *You, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself?*
- *You who preach against stealing, do you steal?*
- *You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?*
- *You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?*
- *You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?*

Now Paul is not saying that all Jews everywhere were thieves, were promiscuous and were religious robbers. But, it was common knowledge that some Jews in the first century did these sorts of things.

Paul's overarching point, of course, is that his Religious Jewish interlocutor is just as sinful as his Gentile neighbor, and they all need the Gospel.

## G. Paul's Conclusion

Paul then concludes his criticism with a crushing indictment, *"God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,"* a quote from Isa 52:5 (Romans 2:24). This is indeed a crushing accusation! In Isaiah's time, the people of God were in exile in Babylon and living amongst the Gentiles, and by the way they were living, they were actually causing people to turn away from God, not toward Him. They had become an embarrassment to God.

It forces us to ask the question, are we an embarrassment to God? Do we "blaspheme God's name"? By the way we live, do we actually cause people to turn away from God, or to God? Michael Bird says this, "When I use my beliefs not as a life preserver to help others, but as a stick to beat up others, then I'm acting out of a sense of superiority, [which] derives from hubris not humility, from preaching without listening, and conviction without compassion" (Bird, 87). Are we using our faith as a life preserver?

But, Paul's not done. He now focuses on the heart of the matter, which is the heart, verse 25.

## III. Focusing On The Heart (25-29)

*25 Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. 26 So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? 27 The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker. 28 A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. 29 No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God. (NIV)*

## A. Introduction

Remarkable words again, as in these verses, Paul, in a sense, redefines a “Jew.”

Circumcision was the great identity marker for Jews. It was instituted by God to Abraham as a sign of the covenantal promises granted to him and his family. But, by Paul’s day, it had become simply a ritual with no meaning behind it. Even worse, the belief was common that just by getting circumcision meant salvation, with no judgment from God. One rabbi from that time even wrote that, “Circumcision would deliver Israel from Gehenna,” Gehenna being another word for hell (Cranfield, 172).

## B. Circumcision

Now, let’s not miss Paul’s point, circumcision was a good thing. It was given by God to Abraham to seal the covenant. It was a symbol that all of Abraham’s life belonged to God, and a symbol that all of God was available to Abraham. It was a very good thing. But, it was not a magic charm against God’s judgment.

It’s like my wedding ring. It’s a symbol of the love between Suzanne and me, but it is not the source of that love or the substance of that love. When we struggle, I don’t rub it for good luck. If I were to lose it, it wouldn’t mean our marriage had ended. Our marriage would continue. It’s simply a symbol.

## C. Circumcision of the Heart

Physical circumcision was only a symbol. It was a great gift, but was only a symbol. And, what had been forgotten was that from the very beginning, physical circumcision was always tied to the heart. It was always a heart thing. Moses even said it back in Deuteronomy, when God told him to instruct the Israelites to circumcise their hearts and not remain arrogant and stiff-necked (Deut 10:16). In the prophets, the people were repeatedly called to circumcise their hearts and turn back to God (Jer 4:4, 9:25; Ezek 44:7). Furthermore, throughout the Old Testament, the call was to *“Be holy as the Lord is holy”* (Lev 21:8; Ex 19:6). In other words, don’t just go through the motions with the rituals, maintain a holy life which springs from a circumcised heart (Rom 2:29).

Today we have the Spirit, which Paul brings into the conversation here. He will of course spend much more time on the gift of the Spirit as we work through Romans.

But, this returns us again to the New Covenant promised in Jeremiah and Ezekial when God would write His law on the heart through His Spirit, causing people to *“act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with Him”* (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:26-27; Mic 6:8). In other words, to *“be holy.”* This is the New Covenant, inaugurated by Jesus’ death and resurrection. It is the gift of God Himself in our hearts which brings about “heart circumcision, heart transformation and life transformation” (Gorman, 105). This is what we need and what we were made for. The personal presence of the living God living inside of us!

## D. Today

Today, we could replace circumcision with almost anything we do. You could simply replace circumcision with say, being born into a Christian family. It's a great gift and privilege to be born into a Christian family, but it will not bring salvation. Or, we could replace it with any rituals we do, such as baptism or communion or going to church on Sundays or offerings. All good things, but they have nothing to do with salvation. They are all symbols of a greater reality. The heart is what matters.

#### **E. Paul's Words**

Paul is reminding his opponent that the heart is the heart of the matter, the heart from which our actions spring. To be a person of God, one must get "heart surgery by God, the divine surgeon" (Gorman, 104).

### **IV. Implications**

#### **A. Introduction**

So, that's our text for today. Once again, heavy words from Paul as we stare at the sin in our lives. We've talked a little bit about implications throughout, but let me summarize three of them, beginning with a few more words about the heart.

#### **B. The Heart**

In John chapter 3, Jesus is visited at night by a very religious man named Nicodemus. Jesus tells *Nick at night* that he must be born again from above to enter the kingdom of God. Born again? Nicodemus is a good religious man. He was probably born into a religious home and grew up in church. He probably attended church every Sunday. He probably knew all the hymns by heart and probably sang in the choir. He, no doubt, would have even been an elder. As someone has said, "Here is Jesus meeting a good Christian." He thought he could get into the kingdom of God through his religiosity. Jesus says, "Nicodemus, it doesn't matter what you know. It doesn't matter whether you are good. It doesn't matter that you are religious. What matters is your heart, being born again through the Holy Spirit entering your life. It's all about the heart. God looks at the heart.

#### **C. Our Actions**

And, it's from the heart that our authentic actions spring. What we do does matter, as we've been saying all along. In the last century, where did we get the idea that our actions somehow didn't matter? They do matter! Actions reveal values. Actions reveal character. Actions reveal our true allegiances. Actually, our actions are simply the most reliable indicators of where our allegiance lies. Actions reveal what we truly believe. They are the fruit of our faith. As James says, "*faith issues in actions or it is dead*" (James 2:14). As Darrell Johnson has said, "We can recite the Apostle's Creed, sing the worship songs, study the Bible, but what we really believe is worked out in how we use our time, how we spend our money, and to what we give our attention" (Johnson, 352).

And, the truth from this passage is that our actions can either reveal Jesus, or blaspheme His name among the people with whom we interact, at home, at work, at play, at school, on the

field, on the court, in the theatre. We are ambassadors for Jesus. I like to think of it as show windows for Jesus. You know what show windows are. An example would be a car dealership with those big windows in the front which show what that dealership is all about – those shiny, new cars. They are there to attract passer-bys and persuade them to come into the store. In the same way, we are God’s show windows on display before a watching world to either demonstrate His great love, or not. Either to honor His name, or to blaspheme His Name. Either to glorify Him or to embarrass Him. Which one will we be?

#### **D. Humility, Humility, Humility**

And, humility. *“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble”* (James 4:6; Prov 3:34). Judgmentalism and hypocrisy are the fruit of pride. *“God opposes the proud.”* And, this passage encourages us, in our status as the people of God, to maintain humility in all things.

What is humility? It is the decision to forgo our status, and use our influence for the good of others before ourselves. We have the Gospel, we have a beautiful church with a beautiful window, we study the Bible deeply, we have good theology. But, may we not take pride in our status. May we not think that we somehow have some advantage with God because we have our theology right, compared to everyone else’s. May we not become arrogant and judgmental.

Let’s take the planks out of our eyes. We are all broken before God. Our sinfulness is no different from anyone else. In this passage, Paul has leveled the playing field. God is impartial in His judgment, and we’re all broken and in need of forgiveness. May we remember our own brokenness and move out in humility and compassion, not judgmentalism. I think we should pray for humility every day.

#### **V. Conclusion**

Well, that’s Romans chapter 2 in two weeks. Paul’s overarching argument is that judgment day is coming for all of us, not just the terrible people. None of us will escape that judgment. Even though God is kind and patient toward us now, we should not presume on that kindness and patience.

Gordon Fee, a professor at Regent College for many years, tells this story of his interaction with Romans 2. As he was sitting at his desk focusing on God’s kindness, patience and longsuffering, he broke down sobbing as the Spirit brought to his attention, “What if it weren’t so Gordon. What if God’s patience and longsuffering wasn’t that long? What if His patience and longsuffering were only as long as yours Gordon?”

God’s love does suffer long! God’s kindness does suffer long! But that should not lead us to arrogance or presumption. It should lead us to repentance. In his words, we should indeed live in Romans 2 much more than we actually do.



## Confession & Assurance

### A. Introduction

As with last week, I want to give us a chance right now to respond in repentance. So, let's begin by being silent for a moment, paying attention to what the Spirit might bring to our attention.

### B. Confession

Amen. Lord our God, gracious Father we have dedicated our souls and our lives to you and yet we find ourselves prone to sin and resistant to obedience.

Now, let's read this confession together.

- We confess that we are so quick to serve ourselves, and so slack in the service of others.
  - **O Lord Forgive Us.**
- We confess that we are so lofty in our speech, but so low in our practice.
  - **O Lord Forgive Us.**
- We confess that we are full of good intentions, but so backward to fulfill them.
  - **O Lord Forgive Us.**
- We confess that we are so severe with our sinful neighbors, yet so indulgent with ourselves.
  - **O Lord Forgive Us.**
- We confess that we are so ready to find fault, but so resentful at being shown up.
  - **O Lord Forgive Us.**

Loving Father, we are helpless apart from you, and yet so unable to remain bound to you. Grant us forgiveness for all our sins and empower us through your Spirit to live in the blessing of obedience, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Let's be silent for another moment while the team plays.

### C. Assurance of Forgiveness

Amen. Let's say together the gracious promise of God's forgiveness in Eph 1:7:

- *In Jesus, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace.*

Amen.

## **Benediction**

Go now “in step with the Spirit,” trusting the Spirit, who resides inside of you, to empower you to “*let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven.*” Amen. Have a great week!

## **Resources**

Achtemeier, Paul, *Romans: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*

Bird, Michael, *Romans (The Story of God Bible Commentary Book 6)*

Fee, Gordon, *Romans* (Regent College MP3)

Gorman, Michael J, *Romans: A Theological and Pastoral Commentary*

Hughes, Kent, *Romans: Righteousness from Heaven (PTW)*

Johnson, Darrell, *Revelation*

Keller, Tim, *Romans 1-7 For You*

Stott, John, *Romans: God's Good News for the World*

Thielman, Frank, *Romans (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)*

Yancey, Philip, *What's So Amazing About Grace*