

The Heart of the Matter Romans 2:17-29

Recently, I was teaching a seminar in Christ-centered exposition at a church in Pennsylvania. It was a group of about 100 people, and largely older folks. ... I made a statement, "We can't read the OT like a Jewish Rabbi does." I was trying to just emphasize the Messianic nature of the Bible (that's a statement many people say; it's not uncommon). In the front row, about ten feet away from me, one old gentleman looked at the other and asked loudly, "You agree with that?!" The other responded with the same volume, "Kinda! He's said a lot of things I don't know about." Then they proceeded to keep talking about the areas of disagreement, all while I'm still working through my lecture!

If you have ever taught before, you know that people have **questions & objections**. Sometimes they wait to the lecture is over. Sometimes they object audibly

Paul is addressing common objections to his teaching here.

If you've ever taught the same content multiple times, you learn to anticipate what the questions will be. Paul is doing that.

He had been preaching for about **twenty years** when he wrote Romans. In verse 16 he refers to "**my gospel**," meaning these are the things that he had been preaching, as we see in the book of Acts, and he knew the kind of reaction that would ensue, especially from the Jews. When you read Acts, you know the response was not always favorable. At times, hostility ensued.

The Jews had a problem with the idea of God's **judgment** because of **their privileged status**.

- They would appeal to the **covenant, the law, and circumcision** routinely.
- These were the "three pillars of Judaism" of sorts.
- Some Jews wanted to hide behind these things.
- But Paul says **there's nowhere to hide from the judgment of God except in Christ Jesus.**
- The Jews would often presume upon God's kindness by pointing out privileges....
 - Jeremiah, "We have the temple, we have the temple" (Jer 7:4)....
 - John the B to the Phar/Sadd, "Do not presume to say, 'We have Abraham'" (Matt 3:9)
 - Philippians 3 – privileges – rubbish -- He needed to be "found in him."

Being Jewish doesn't mean you are immune from judgment.

These things are useless Paul says if there's not an **obedience that springs from faith in Christ.**

1:18-3:20 Sin and Judgment

Gentiles in **1:18-32**; **chapter 2** Jewish world. **Ch 3**: everyone should shut their mouth. **Remember the Context**: Jews first, then expelled, Gentile majority, Jews back...drama

Why all this talk about sin and judgment? Couldn't Paul just tell us in a sentence?

- All of this is meant to push is down, down, down, so that we may be saved, and that we may be unified.
- Until we are buried in humility, we can't be lifted up.
- Until we are laid bare before Almighty God and left crying out, "God be merciful to me a sinner" we can't be saved.
- Until that happens we won't know the commonality we share.
- The pervasiveness of sin and the sober reality of judgment should cause us to love the Savior together.
- "Till sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet." (Thomas Whatson)

He's wanting to expose the sin of both the unrighteousness and self-righteous.

- **We love to point out the sin in others. Legalists are the best.**
- **Mohler story - Communion at age 20, 8 people - legs, lipstick, liquor.** They used homemade moonshine - he thought was kerosene.
- Legalists make up sins, and fail to see their own sin.
- And they fail to deal with the fact that salvation is about an inward change that creates new affections for Christ; it's not a list of rules.

So addressed the unrighteousness in ch 1, he goes after the self-righteous in chapter 2.

Verses **2:1-17** was aimed at the Critical Moralizer:

1. God's judgment reflects the reality of the situation (2)
2. God's judgment allows for no exceptions (3)
3. God's judgment unmasks all presumption (4a)
4. God's judgment involves a merciful call to repentance (4b)
5. God's judgment results in terrible retribution (5)
6. God's judgment is based on what we've really been, sought, and done (6-8)
7. God's judgment is without partiality (2:11)
8. God's judgment has eternal consequences (8-9)
9. God's judgment is pronounced individually (9)
10. God's judgment is made according to the light we have received (11-15)
11. God's judgment reaches to the secrets of our hearts (2:16)
12. God's judgment is in the hands of the Lord Jesus Christ (2:16)

2:17-29: Paul continues this rebuke against the Jews, highlighting the problem with the Self-Confident Religious Hypocrite

The reason chapter two is so important for us is that it's possible to be deeply religious and not converted.

- There is "an appearance" of godliness that is devoid of the Spirit (2 Tim 3:5)
- It is all too easy to have a misleading religious confidence.
- You can be an unconverted irreligious person; or an unconverted religious person.

- **John Newton** – a drunken sailor and slave trader; **John Wesley**, a religious missionary who had to be converted even after going on mission trips.

In chapter 2 is the religious person who needs to be converted.

Paul tells the Jews:

- “You’re heart has not been changed.”
- “You haven’t believed in Jesus.”
- “You need new spiritual life.”
- “Outward conformity to religion cannot save you.”

The same is true for everyone else!

He doesn't say one bad thing about the law; he's simply emphasizing what the law can't do - he's attacking religious legalism.

Paul gets to the heart of the matter here.

What Paul Says: [Three summary statements]

As we read about what Paul says to the Jews, please know that there's **not an ounce of anti-Semitism** here. **If anyone loved the Jews it was Paul**. In **chapter 9** he says that he would rather trade places with them – he receiving judgment and them salvation. He loves them enough to speak the truth to them.

#1: You don't practice what you preach from the law of God (17-22)

Paul rebukes the Jews for their **inconsistency**.

- He's trying to **pop their religious pride and presumption**.

8 Verbs to Describe their Privileges

- He doesn't deny the reality of Jewish privilege.
- He brings these things up to highlight their **haughtiness** and their **hypocrisy**.

1. You **call** yourself a Jew (17a)

- a. The name for those belonging to the people of Israel, originally associated with the region of Judah.
- b. **The name suggested a special status.**

2. You **rely** on the law (17b)

- a. That is, you trust in your **possession of the law**.
- b. Micah 3:11, Micah rebukes the leaders and they say, “Is not the Lord in our midst? Calamity will not come upon us”
- c. Paul: “Just because you possess the law doesn't mean you're exempt from judgment. “

3. You **brag/boast** about your relationship with God (17)

- a. Boasting in God is not wrong (Jer 9:23-24), but it shouldn't make one **feel superior to others**. It should produce **humility**.

4. You **know** God's will (18a)

- a. They had the written Word of God and could thus live it out.

- b. They had not only knowledge of God in creation, but **in the Scriptures.**
5. You **approve** what is superior (18b)
- They were able to apply the law, making moral judgments.
 - They were **far better than those ignorant Gentiles!**
 - Legalism produces pride; grace produces humility.
 - Kids are natural legalists - so they like to correct each other. On the one hand, you're glad they're behaving. But their response should be brokenheartedness and love; not critical self-righteousness.**
6. You are **instructed** from the law (18c)
- This is how they could know God's will and approve what's best.
 - In the **synagogues and from childhood** and in other contexts they would have been instructed.
 - Compared to the uneducated Gentiles, they felt good about themselves.**
7. You are **sure** that you are able to teach others. (19-20)
- Having been taught, they taught others.
 - This was part of the Jewish mission – to be **a light to the nations** (Is 42:6; 49:6)
 - The **Torah** was to be **a beacon of justice in an unjust world.**
 - Israel was **to show the world what God was like.**
8. You **have** in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth (20)
- The problem of course was that they needed **a new heart.**
 - You can **strut around with a Greek or Hebrew Bible but not be converted.**
 - You can like the art of preaching, and not be changed by the message.**

Application: Let's apply this to Xians.

It's indeed a privilege to have the word of God, and to be instructed in the Word of God. Sermons, seminaries, online resources...

- *my wife, Piper's killing it!*

How have you responded to these privileges? With faithfilled obedience hopefully.

To the Jews: There's a world of difference between possessing privileges and possessing saving faith.

- “You have all these privileges of but don't know the Bible's Lord.” (Jn 5:39, 46)
- Having all the privileges without salvation just makes the verdict on the last day – guilty, guilty, guilty.

4 Questions about how they haven't lived up to these privileges (21-23):

1. Do you not teach yourself? (21)

- Implication, your life indicates that **you don't sit under your own preaching.**
- 1 Timothy 4:12 precedes 4:13.

Three particular sins are then mentioned...

2. They preached against stealing, yet stole (21b)

3. They preached against adultery, yet committed adultery (22a)

4. They preached against idolatry, yet benefited from the very idols they detested (23)

Does this mean every Jew committed these sins?

- **Of course not. Not every Jew robbed temples!** (Pagan temples had a lot of expensive items, and apparently some were prone to take things from them. Some people may have stolen, or they may have found a sophisticated way to take money).
- **These are colorful examples of law-breaking.**
- **Paul is simply saying something that is true generally: All Jews are guilty before God.** They haven't kept the law of God.

The point is simple: you are guilty of the very things you rail against.

Jesus in **Matthew 23**, to the religious leaders:

... For they preach, but do not practice. ⁴ They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. ⁵ They do all their deeds to be seen by others.... Woe to you, blind guides (23:3b, 16)

Paul, like Jesus, exposes the sin of the Jews.

- **And no one keeps the "deepening of the law" in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.** So there is a contradiction in **claim** and **conduct** in this Jewish teacher.

Application:

To become a Christian, you must **give up striving to earn acceptance with God through your effort, deeds, and religiosity.** It won't work.

- Jesus told **Nicodemus**, a religious teacher: "You must be born again."
- He doesn't tell him, "Your good bro because you teach." He says "your dead in your sins."

If you are a Christian, you must **fight the sin of hypocrisy every day.**

What does that look like?

- **Pursue integrity: May our lives match our sermons!**
 - If you preach pro-family, do you actually love your family?
 - If you preach pro-life, do you value every human life, from the womb to resurrection?
 - If you preach pro-equality among races, are you actually learning, listening, and loving any particular persons of another race?
 - If you preach against adultery, do you look at porn?
 - If you preach against legalism, do you way others down with your rules?
 - If you preach on loving the poor, do you even know a poor person?
 - If you preach, "You can't out give God," "give till it hurts," are you greedy and tightfisted?
- **Cultivate humility.** The problem with the hypocrite is not that the person is **not perfectly obedient** – no one is – the problem is that the person is **claiming to be something more than he or she is not.**
 - We must cultivate a life **of humble repentance not haughty self-righteousness.**
 - **We're very educated. That's a Blessing, but a danger.**
 - "The aim of our charge is love." Doctrine of grace should make us gracious.

- **Kill idolatry.** Underneath the sin is a worship problem – the praise of men (you want people to admire you), **the fear of man, a love of money** (it's often said, "To identify your idol or idols, just **follow your money**").
- **Live out the doctrine of Grace Practically.** **Gal 2:11-14**, Paul rebukes Peter for Peter's "hypocrisy." Why? Because he refused to eat with the Gentiles.

#2: You dishonor the name of God (23-24)

Here we see the shameful **effects** of hypocrisy...

V. 23: You dishonor God.

- **The theme of dishonor: 1:21**// Both Jews and Gentiles dishonor God.
- This is what makes sin so awful. We're failing to live for that which we are created: God's glory.

V. 24: This seems to be a combination of Isaiah 52:5 and Ezek 36:22.

- In both texts, God's name was **dishonored because the people had not been faithful, particularly as they lived among unbelieving nations.**
- **"All day long my name is despised"** God says in Isaiah.

Examples of this type of hypocrisy abound.

- **Nathan to David**, "by doing this you have made the enemies of the Lord show utter disrespect" 2 Sam 12:14
- **Abraham** experienced essentially the same thing when he told Pharaoh that Sarah was his sister and Pharaoh took her. **Abraham would have no more testimony for God before the Egyptians.**

You often build credibility unbelievers **slowly**, but you can lose it **quickly**.

Stuart Briscoe's fellow employee in a bank... stole money ... and after being caught asked if he should still preach on the upcoming Sunday! The people were not only upset, but Briscoe said that they totally dismissed this man's church and his God.

God's name is at stake in moments of temptation.

- **Your influence on others is at stake.**
- Teenagers/college **students**, think about this. **If you are living just like your unbelieving peers, what do they think about your God? About your church? Do you think they will be drawn to Christ?**
- Xians – **the world doesn't need any more reasons to be negative toward the faith.**

What honors God and attracts the nations is faith-filled obedience to God.

- **Saul of Tarsus** had observed real faith in **Stephen**...
- My **baseball teammates** lived out an attractive faith in front of me...

So the Jews have the Torah, but haven't kept it; now, Paul says they have circumcision but haven't experienced circumcision of the heart...

#3: You need to be transformed inwardly by the Spirit of God (25-29)

Circumcision was a sign of God's covenant with Israel (Gen 17:9-14)

But it wasn't a *magic* charm.

It didn't provide them with protection from God's wrath.

They had developed sort of a superstitious attitude about this experience.

- One Jewish writing, "Circumcised men do not descend to Gehenna" and "Circumcision will never deliver Israel from Gehenna." (in Stott).

They had missed the fact that the sign was to point to an inner reality.

- This is made plain throughout the NT – Galatians 6:15.

While baptism and circumcision are different; there is a connection.

- Baptism is to be a sign of an inward reality.
- The sign is worthless without the reality – new life in Christ.

Paul tells the Jews in Rome that circumcision is no substitute for the obedience of faith. So what Paul addresses is false assurance.

25-26: Circumcision has value if you keep the law.

- Paul validates the divine origin of circumcision. But clarifies that it has with it an accompanying requirement to obey the law.
- Circumcision is a sign of the covenant – and the covenant involved a commitment to obedience.
- So, verse 25b: If you are circumcised, and you break the law, it's as if you haven't been circumcised.
- 26: On the other hand, if you haven't been circumcised, but keep the law, it's like you have been.
- Stott summarizes: "Circumcision minus obedience equals un-circumcision, while un-circumcision plus obedience equals circumcision."

What matters is not their possession of the law, nor the external act of circumcision, but obedience that springs from faith.

27: A shocking thought. The obedient Gentiles will sit in judgment over the disobedient Jews. This is salt to the wound.

- The Jews thought they were sitting in judgment. Paul flips it on them.

It's like Matthew 12:41-42 when Jesus rebuked the Jews for rejecting him: "41 The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

42 The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here."

App: We can apply this to anyone with privilege of being around Christians and the gospel. Growing up in a Christian home, attending a Christian youth group, or school, doesn't make you a Christian. You can have all kinds of privileges – but this doesn't make you a Christian.

What Paul is saying is something like this – it will be like a person who didn't grow up as a Christian but as a Hindu, and will stand up on the last day to the person who grew up surrounded by Christians and heard the Bible regularly, and they will say, "Why didn't you believe? You had all these privileges. You should have believed!" Or, it's like the Iranian believers who believed despite being under severe persecution, and there are non-Christians who grew up surrounded by Christians but don't believe. And the Iranian believer will say, "Why didn't you believe! Your persecution was light – yet you didn't believe."

Kids, or any person who has grown up with great privileges -- **we don't want that to happen to you**. We want you to know Jesus. But **you** have to believe.

28-29: The heart of the matter. Paul tells us who the true people of God are.

1. True Jewishness (even for a Gentile) is not something outward and visible but inward in invisible (28)

- How can some Jews not be Jews?
- One can be a Jew **ethnically**, but not **spiritually**. (Rom 9:6)
- Most Jews in the world are **not** believers in Christ.
- Only "True Jews" will experience eternal life. They have a new heart.

Paul paves the way for a later discussion in chapter 9, where Paul will distinguish between **"Israel according to the flesh"** and **"Israel according to the promise."**

And by speaking of the obedience of the Gentiles, Paul is introducing something else that he will elaborate more fully on in Rom 10 and 11 – he is provoking the Jews to **"jealousy"** (11:11).

- By saying the Gentiles are true Jews, he intends for the Jews to say, "What are we doing!" "We are missing it!"
- It reminds me of the elder brother in Luke 15 – come on man! Get in the house! Come home!

2. True circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit (29a)

- This was not new to Paul.
- It occurs regularly in the OT.
- God tells his people to circumcise their hearts

Deut 10:16: Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your **heart**, and be no longer stubborn.

Jere 9:25: "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will punish all those who are circumcised **merely** in the flesh

- With this call, was also a promise of new heart

Ezekiel 36:25-27

- ²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Dr. Christian Barnard, the first surgeon ever to do a heart transplant, impulsively asked one of his patients, Dr. Philip Blaiberg, who was the second person to receive a transplant, “Would you like to see your old heart?” At 8 p.m. on a subsequent evening, the men stood in a room in Johannesburg, South Africa. Dr. Barnard went up to a cupboard, took down a glass container and handed it to Dr. Blaiberg. Inside that container was Blaiberg’s old heart. For a moment he stood there stunned into silence—the first man in history ever to hold his own heart in his hands. Finally he spoke and for ten minutes asked Dr. Barnard with technical questions. Then he turned to take a final look at the contents of the glass container, and said, “So this is my old heart that caused me so much trouble.” He handed it back, turned away and left it forever. (Hughes)

- This is like what God does with our spiritual heart when we become Christians.
- **We have the same body, but our hearts become radically new.**
- Our old hearts gave us so much trouble!
- The difference with a physical heart change and spiritual heart change is that you will still die eventually if you receive a physical heart transplant. Blairerg died 594 days later. But those who are new creations will not.

NT: Made alive, new creation, the new self/man, born anew, born again.

- All denote God's sovereign work of regeneration...
- **Chuck Colson, Nixon, born again, redundant. "Three sided triangle" or "unmarried bachelor." If you aren't regenerate you aren't a Christian.**
- People add it to correct the idea that you can take the title without having transformation. Not just a church goer, but a new creation.
- New affections are now present because we have a new heart.
- New affections for others also - 1 John 3, passed from death/life, love brothers

3. The Holy Spirit will make this a reality in believers (29b).

“Not by written code,” meaning **the Spirit will do something the law can't do: Make us new!**

- Paul will elaborate more on this subject
7:6 But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.

Chapter 8 speaks of the indwelling Spirit multiple times...

¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷

- It is only circumcision in the Spirit that counts!
- Philippians 3:3 – “We are the real circumcision.”
- The Holy Spirit will do the deep work of transforming the heart.
- Only God can do this.

The Spirit’s Knife is the Word of God, which performs this circumcision of the heart.

4. The person with a new heart will be approved by God (29c)

Paul probably has something at the end in mind.

On the final day, God will honor those who are truly His people.

Outward conformity cannot save.

You need to be transformed **inwardly by the Spirit of God.**

Why It’s Significant:

1. Gospel. True salvation is a matter of the heart.

- Don’t trust in religious **affirmations, affiliations, or activities.**
- Jews trusted in **heritage, knowledge, and ceremony** – and they were false securities.
- You can say the **Creed** weekly but not know Christ.
- You can have **Christian friends** but not be a Christian.
- You can be **baptized and attend church services** regularly and be unregenerate.
- You can be **a seminary student** and not be converted.
 - **Tom Nettles** – Went to SW seminary and says he went “unconverted.”
- You can be busy with all kinds of **Christian activities** but be dead in your trespasses.
- Become a Christian isn’t about becoming a **nicer person** or a **more religious person**; it’s about become a **new person**.
- It’s about having the **indwelling Spirit of Christ** (Romans 8:9).
- It may be difficult to conceive of religious people being, but the Scriptures indicate this is indeed can happen:

Matt 7:22-23: “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?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

2. Community. Crush any sense of superiority toward another race and cultivate unity in Christ.

- Paul’s argument about the universality of sin shows that no one should think of himself or herself as better or more important than another race.

- We are one in the imago dei.
- And we are one in Adam – that is, we are all sinners in need of Jesus.
- In Christ, we are one. In Christ, we have new affections for God's people.
- Jewett, “Paul opens a way to overcome cultural and religious bigotry by means of righteousness through faith in Christ crucified.”
- **DNA Test back: .8% African! This past week in airport, someone ask me again.... There’s something more important than that kind of ancestry research – a spiritual reality.** Believers in Jesus are one.

3. Mission. We must be a light for the nations.

Mission is addressed explicitly and implicitly.

The implicit call is here in the doctrines of sin and judgment.

- Because the whole world is guilty, the whole world needs to hear the gospel!
- General revelation won't save.
- Religious activity won't save.

Mission is addressed explicitly in that Paul mentions Israel’s call to **teach others** **(2:19)**

- They failed to be a light to the nations.
- But now, through Christ Jesus, we have this calling rest on us, and we go about it in the power of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 1:8)
- **The church must not become some preservationist’s society, hiding from the secularists, pluralists, and Muslims.**
- **We must not turn inward, praying the prayer of Jabez for God to give us more stuff...**
- **We must take risks, live lives of faith, by the power of the Spirit, so that the nations be rejoice in our King.**

This mission can be lived out in a variety of ways:

- Discipling kids
- Praying for open doors for the gospel
- Making financial sacrifices to support the mission
- Being a faithful witness in the workplace, school, or places of recreation
- Planting churches
- Renewing rural congregations
- Serving the poor, the orphan, the widow, the stranger
- Translating the Bible among people who have no Bible

May God grant us grace to shine as lights in this dark world, as we live by the power of the Spirit!

