

Romans: The Jew's Failure

Romans 2:21-24

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July 16, 2000

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans, chapter 2, verse 21, as we continue to work through this glorious gospel of Romans. Though it's a letter to a local congregation, it certainly does contain for us a beautiful presentation of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have emphasized over the last several weeks that in Romans 1, verses 18 to the end of the chapter, to verse 32, the apostle Paul basically says to the Gentile world, 'Even though you have not had a special revelation of the moral law of God and the Ten Commandments from Moses given to you; nevertheless, you are guilty for breaking the law, and you need my gospel.' Paul had anticipated the Gentiles saying, well we haven't ever hurt the law the Israel, how could God condemn us for not having obeyed the law of Israel we've never heard it. And the apostle Paul responds by saying, everybody knows God, everybody knows that he or she ought to worship God. Everybody has the works, the principals of that law, God's law, God's moral law, written on their heart, and everybody breaks it. And, therefore, everybody is culpable. Not only as God created everyone, but He has caused everyone to be created in His image and to have indelibly impressed upon their souls a knowledge of him. A knowledge that they ought to worship Him, a knowledge of how He wants them to live, and that they've rebelled against Him. Therefore, they are culpable. They deserve judgment. Therefore, Paul says, "You do need my gospel. Even if you've not grown up in a religious setting where you've heard the Bible read day after day, you need my gospel."

Then, in Romans, chapter 2 beginning in verse 1, he turns his focus on the religious people of his day, the Jewish people, his own people. The people from whence he came, the people from whence Messiah came. And he says to them, "Now you, too, need my gospel. And their response is, "But Paul we have the law, and we have been chosen by the God of Israel." And Paul says, "Right, true, Israel is the subject of the national election of God. Israel has the recipient of the law of God, and yet though you have received the law of Moses, you've broken it. Though you glory in the God of Israel, you rebel against Him. You sin against Him. In fact, you cause His name to be blasphemed. The apostle is bringing an argument in Romans 1 and in Romans 2 to say that everybody needs his gospel. There's nobody out there who can say, that's nice, that's fine for you, Paul, I've

got another way. Paul is saying everybody needs my gospel. And he's explaining why. And we're continuing on in this passage where he's speaking specifically to Jews.

Now before we do, let me say one thing. It is possible, I mean, let's face it, you read Romans 2, verses 1 through 24 in the presence of a dear Jewish friend. And if they're listening, they are going to be offended. These words were offensive to Jewish people when Paul first spoke them. Recognize this is not anti-Semitism. The apostle Paul was a Jew. The apostle Paul loved the Jewish people. He's going to tell us what he thought about the Jewish people in Romans 9, 10, and 11. In fact, in that passage he is going to say that he wishes that he himself could be eternally cursed and under the damnation of God. If only his people would come to faith in Christ. He loved his people with all his heart. And so his words are not words that are based on ethnic resentment and anger and hatred. His words are based upon the truth and upon a heart of love. He longs to see his people come to a saving knowledge of Christ. These are not anti-Semitic words any more than the words of the prophets in the Old Testament are anti-Semitic when they chastise Israel for failing to follow after the Lord God. No, Paul is speaking God's word to his people as a Jew who has converted to the Lord Jesus Christ. And he is begging them, he is beckoning them to embrace their Messiah. And so to know all the benefits of His saving work. So bear that in mind as we look at this great passage and let's continue in our study reading God's word in Romans 2:21.

You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself, you who preach that one should not steal. Do you steal? You who say that one should not commit adultery. Do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols. Do you rob temples? You who boast in the law, through your breaking the law, do you dishonor God? For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles, because of you, just as it is written.

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Heavenly Father, we pray this day that again You would teach us from Your holy word that we would see the Lord Jesus Christ, that we would see our sins and our need of Christ. And His grace. That we would embrace Him as we respond to the gospel. We pray, O Lord, that You would save us from self-delusion, and self-righteousness, and hypocrisy; and that You would lead us into the way of truth and sincerity, faith and obedience. These things we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

You may want to sneak a peek at verses 17 through 20 of Romans, chapter 2, because the sentence that we began to read in Romans 2:21 is actually the end of a sentence that the apostle had started back in verse 17. Paul has been convicting the Jews on the basis of their own moral law ever since verse 1 of this

passage. In other words, he's saying, "Yes, you have the moral law, but you haven't lived up to it. Yes, you have the moral law, but you've broken it. Yes, you have the moral law; but even though you glory in it, and you presume to teach others, especially the Gentiles about it, you yourself have discounted that moral law. You have ignored it. You have broken it, you have flagrantly violated it." And here in verses 21 through 24, he clinches this argument.

He's actually going to move on to a new phase of the argument beginning in verse 25. From verse 25 down to verse 29, he's going to begin talking about the ceremonial law. But to this point, he's focusing on the moral law, because Israel assumed that they were impeccable with regard to the keeping of the moral law. But even as he speaks to his own people, even as he speaks to the Jewish people, he is speaking here and clinching his argument against all religious people who are without Christ and without grace. So before you are too quick to point the finger at these first century Palestinian Jews, remember that Paul's words are equally applicable to anyone who professes to know the true God, but who is, in fact, without Christ and without the experience and the receipt of saving grace.

Now there are two things I'd like you to concentrate upon in this passage. In verses 21 through 23, Paul is concerned to expose the hypocrisy of Jewish self-righteousness. In verse 24, he is concerned to show what is the effect upon the witness of the Jewish people of their own hypocrisy and self-righteousness. So in these two parts of his discussion, we learn several very important things.

I. When examined in light of their own claims, Christ-less, grace-less moralists always fall short.

In verses 21 through 23, Paul is continuing his argument from verses 17 through 20. In those verses, 17 through 20, he picked out eight areas that reflected a Jew's self-understanding of his relationship to God and his relationship to the Gentiles. And he basically uses those areas to condemn the Jew of hypocrisy. Look at those verses for a few moments. Let's walk through them.

Notice, first of all, he speaks of four things that the Jew thinks about himself in terms of his relationship with God. You take confidence in the fact that you are Jew. "You bear the name Jew," he says in verse 17. "You take confidence in your possession of the law and in your obedience to it. You rely upon the law," he says. "You are proud of your God. You boast in your God and you take confidence in your spiritual and moral discernment. You know His will, you approve the things that are essential being instructed out of the law. All of these are the things that the Jew thinks about himself," Paul says, with relationship to God. Then, keep on following through all those verses, he begins to talk about how the Jew thinks about himself with regard to the Gentiles. He says, "You are convinced that you are a God for the Gentiles, who are blind. You are convinced

that you live in light while the Gentiles live in darkness. You are convinced that you are capable of and, in fact, called to the job of tutoring those who are foolish in the ways of God, and you are convinced that you are well equipped to instruct new converts in the way of life." All these things the Jew thinks of with regard to the Gentiles, and especially to those who are proselyte Jews. Those Gentiles who are converting to Judaism and being instructed in the faith. And the apostle Paul is saying this with that final phrase. "You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself?" He is saying, he is bringing general charge that his people does not practice what it preaches. It claims one thing, but it does another.

It professes one thing, but it practices another. It says that it believes one thing, but it behaves in another way. Paul, in short, like Jesus, is accusing his own people collectively, generally and specifically of hypocrisy. You see why I say that this would not have met a very happy response when it was first heard, when it was first spoken. What Paul is saying amounts to this. If you present yourself as a person who relies on God in His law, and even teach others the meaning of His law and impress upon them that they should live in harmony with it, how is it that you yourself do not practice what you preach?

Now friends, that charge would have been shocking to the Jews. It would have been absolutely shocking to them, and it would have been shocking to them for a variety of reasons. It is very true that the Jews saw themselves as distinct from the world in their receipt of the law of Moses, and they despised the rank polytheism that surrounded them in the Greco-Roman world.

But let's also remember that the generation of Jews living in the time of Christ and Paul was the first generation of Jews of whom it could be clearly said that they had utterly rejected formal idolatry. Think of it. Ever since God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees, what have the Old Testament people of God been struggling with? Idolatry. Abraham, himself, was an idolater. In his family there were people who continued to house household gods. Constantly in the times of Judges and Joshua God's prophets and judges had to keep the people from going after the ashterah or going after Baal or going after the sun god or the moon god, or whoever the Johnny-come-lately god of the day was in the cults that were around them. Constantly, the people of God were being pulled off the path of the worship of the one true God, and they were worshiping idols. The prophets continued to charge the people of God with being idolaters and of not being faithful to the one true God. And finally, after the exile in Babylon, the people of God got the message. And they were confident that they may be many things, but they were not idolaters. And suddenly here's the apostle Paul saying, "And by the way, you who abhor idolatry, you are, in fact, temple robbers. You're not only idolaters, you're out stealing the idols of pagan temples." It is the most brutal, frontal attack possible upon the morality of the Jewish people. And it would have been absolutely shocking.

Now, you may ask, how can Paul say this? How can Paul say that the whole Jewish people who has not accepted the Lord Jesus Christ is hypocritical. I mean, Paul, isn't that a little over the top? I mean, aren't there a few people out there that aren't hypocritical? And the apostle Paul says, "No, all of my people who have not embraced the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, are, in fact, hypocritical."

How can he get by with this? Well, first of all, contemporary literature from the Rabbis itself confirms that the Rabbis knew that this was a problem, at least among some Jews. You can pick up Rabbinic literature, and you can find the rabbis talking about people who practice differently than they preach. People who say that they believe one thing, and yet believe in another way.

Furthermore, of course, the Old Testament prophets were constantly bringing that charge against Israel. This is nothing new that Paul is saying here. He is repeating precisely what the Old Testament prophets had consistently said. Israel, you say one thing, you worship me with your lips, but your hearts are far from me. And so constantly in the Old Testament prophets there is this call for what? For sincere worship. That is, worship that comes from the heart, not which is just purely external, not just going through the motions. Prophets can say it in dramatic ways. Isaiah can say, I hate your new moons and festivals, even though He appointed them. I hate them. Why? Because you're worshipping with your lips and not your hearts, and you're breaking my law. So what Paul is saying is nothing new in that regard.

Furthermore, remember that this was Jesus main charge against the Jews. It was His main charge against the Pharisees. What? That they were hypocritical. So again, Paul is simply following in a time-honored tradition of the same message of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, Paul's teaching is based upon a biblical understanding of the demands of the moral law. The people of Israel had thought that they could commend themselves to God by doing two things. By scaling down their own sin and what it deserved, and by scaling down the demands of the moral law. And the apostle Paul says, "Look, when you understand how serious sin is, and what it deserves in terms of judgment, and when you understand just how high are the demands of the moral law, you will not think that you can commend yourself to God. You will be incapable of thinking yourself as a moral and upright person who deserves the affirmation, the acquittal of God Almighty." And so he scales up their understanding of sin. And he scales up their understanding of the demands of the moral law, and he says, "In light of your sin, and in light of the moral law, do you really think that you can stand as righteous before God?" Again, we must understand that the Christian charge against the Jews was not that they were making too much of the law. It's that they weren't making enough of it. And finally, there is indeed evidence of a terrible degradation of Jewish morals around the time immediately prior to the destruction of the temple.

For all these reasons, the apostle Paul brings this charge against his people. He does it to uncover the spiritual dichotomy between their preaching and their practice, between what they believed and the way they act. And he does it with four questions. Three specific charges and then a summarizing question. Look at these questions in verses 21 through 23. You who preach that one shall not steal? Do you steal? You who say that one should not commit adultery. Do you commit adultery? You who are poor idols. Do you rob temples? Then here's the summarizing statement. You who boast in the law through you're breaking of the law, do you dishonor God? Paul brings these charges in areas that the Jews would have conceived themselves to be strong in. They would have conceived themselves to be strong and upright. They weren't an adulterous people in general, they would have thought. We're a fairly moral people. We're not deceiving honest people. We're a fairly moral people. We're not an idolatrous people. The Gentiles are idolaters, but we're not.

And Paul goes right to their self-perceived strengths, and he says here's the best areas that you think you have to offer to God, and I want to tell you that you're ranked sinners. He does this to expose their hypocrisy. And I want you to note in passing that Paul's critique of Israel is utterly different than a modern relativistic, pluralistic, liberal's critique it would have been. Paul doesn't say, "You know, your problem is that you think that you've got a corner on the truth. Your problem is that you're imposing your morality on everybody else." Paul doesn't say that. Paul, in fact, says, "You're right. You do have a corner on the truth. And you're right. You do have the right morality. It's God's morality, and it is imposed upon the whole world." His complaint is that they are not living consistently with what they profess. He doesn't say, "You know, you people really need to become more broadminded and open-minded and realize that all the roads lead up the mountain. There are many different ways to God, and everybody is saying you're okay, I'm okay, everybody's got the right way. We can't bring criticism against people if they live differently than us." That's not what Paul says. Paul says, "You're right. God has chosen you, and He's chosen you to be a witness to the nations for His truth by living according to it. And you haven't done it. You have failed. You have fallen short, and you will be condemned." Inconsistency between profession and practice is Paul's proof of sin. Hypocrisy pointed out to the people is Paul's proof of sin. It is also His proof of their deserving of judgment, and it is His proof of their need of grace.

Now friends, when examined in the light of their own claims, Christless, graceless, moralists will always fall short. In light of their own claims, and their own standards, apart from Christ, apart from grace, a moralist will always fall short. And that is precisely what Paul is saying here. "You feel like you have a strong sense of character and of right and wrong. You're apart from Christ, you don't think the gospel is for you, you don't know what saving grace means, you don't know what it means to be born again." He says, "You're a hypocrite."

It's easy to preach honesty to other people, but it's not so easy, is it, to be scrupulously honest in all one's dealings. We're always tempted to grade honesties. And by a strange coincidence, our own dishonesties have a way of coming out as the minor infractions. While someone else's dishonesty is important and severe and deserves God's judgment, we always have a way of cutting ourselves slack, even as we bring judgment and condemnation against others for the same sin. And the apostle Paul is pointing out that inconsistency, that hypocrisy that dwells in each of us. And look, he knew it, he had been a hypocrite himself. You couldn't fool him. He had seen his own heart, and he knew what was in the heart of men.

And so, why does he say all this? To point out that these people don't have a righteousness that will commend them to God. They need an alien righteousness. They need a righteousness that comes outside of themselves. They need a righteousness that will be imputed to them, credited to their account. And the apostle Paul knows that the only righteousness that will do is the righteousness and the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And he's telling them this so that they will know that they cannot take refuge in themselves. They can only take refuge in the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul is kicking out the legs of every prop that they are trying to set up to commend themselves to God so that they will have only one place to flee, and that is to Jesus Christ and His finished work. That is what Paul is doing here. But he's not finished yet. He continues in verse 24, and he says another thing.

II. When professing believers claim to be followers of God/Christ and live in contradiction of that profession they become the single greatest hindrance to the gospel.

In verse 24, he describes the horrendous detriment to the covenantal privilege and responsibility of the Jewish people to witness to the nations that their hypocrisy brings about. Their hypocrisy is a detriment to that privilege that they have to be a witness to the nations. From the time that Israel was called out of Ur of the Chaldees, from the time that Abraham was given the covenant promise, what was at the very heart of that promise? That he would be a blessing to the nations. The book of Genesis, especially from Genesis 12:1 on, is a missionary book. The call of Israel is a missionary call. Israel is called so that the nations might know the one true God and worship Him. They are to have the privilege of being the witness to what a real relationship with God is like. And the way that you enter into it, and walk in it, their job is to bear witness to the nations. It is emphasized throughout the Old Testament as well as the new.

And the apostle Paul is saying in verse 24, not only have they failed to do that; but their hypocrisy, their immorality, has in fact negated that witness, in fact, it has caused that witness to be reversed so that the Gentiles blaspheme because of them.

Now again, you cannot possibly imagine how devastating that would have been. By Paul's time, the Jewish people wouldn't even say the name of the Lord. That name that is spelled with the vowels, YHWH, which we sometimes hear pronounced Jehovah. They wouldn't even say it because they were so concerned that the name of God would not be taken in vain, it would not be blasphemed. And so that in order to keep the Third Commandment, they wouldn't even say the name of God. I mean,, you can't take the name of God in vain if you just don't speak it, right? They were that concerned about the name of God. A friend of mine was just telling me this morning that he had been to Chicago to the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibition, and in some of those scrolls there was a more modern form of Hebrew print. But when they came to the name of God, the tetragrammaton, the YHWH, they spelled it in the older form of Hebrew out of reverence for the name, and it stood out so that even a non-Hebrew reader could see the name. Such was the reverence the name was held in, and here is the apostle Paul saying, "And by the way, because the way you live, that name is blasphemed by the Gentiles. That's the effect of your hypocrisy. That's the effect of your immorality."

And Paul verifies this by quoting from Isaiah 52:5. You know what Isaiah is saying. Isaiah is saying, "Look, because you have been carted off into exile, into Babylon, the name of God is blasphemed amongst the Gentiles." The Gentiles are sitting around there saying, "Well, they must not have much of a God. They're in exile. They got toted out of their land and into another land. Their God must not be much."

You know, in a way what Paul is saying to Israel is worse than that. You know it is directly because of your immorality and hypocrisy that God is blasphemed. Despite your profession, because of the way you have lived, God's name is blasphemed by the Gentiles. And what Paul is pointing out here, is the effect of hypocrisy upon the witness to the promises and the mercies of God. And what Paul is teaching us here is that when professing believers claim to be followers of God and live in contradiction of that profession, they become the greatest hindrance to the worship of God. Let me put that in Christian terms. When professing Christian believers claim to be followers of Christ, and they live in contradiction of that profession, they become the single, greatest hindrance to the gospel. The greatest hindrance to the spread of the gospel in the world this day, is not that the Bible has not been translated in every language, it's not that we don't have missionaries amongst every people group. The greatest single hindrance to the cause of the gospel today is nominal Christianity, hypocrisy, false believers, people who claim to be believers but who do not give any evidence whatsoever of the reality of that claim. The single biggest obstacle to evangelism is hypocrisy. And the greatest impediment to the spread of the gospel today is the nominal Christian.

Now there are several levels of application to this truth. Let me just mention

three. First of all, to the moral unbeliever. There may be a moral unbeliever or two in our midst, open-minded person who would even come to First Presbyterian Church and suffer through this. A person who thinks, that's okay for you, you all can believe that. I don't need that. I'm a moral person. I'm not real sure what God is like, and I'm not real sure whether there will be a judgment, but if there is a judgment, I think I've been a pretty good person, and I think I'm going to be okay. I appreciate your sharing the gospel with me, don't stop by the house, I'm okay.

There may be a moral unbeliever amongst us. Well, Paul has something to say to you. And what Paul has to say is this: "You are not as moral as you think you are." In fact, Paul has this to say to you. If the one true God is the God who has revealed Himself in the word, and He is; then you will certainly fall short in His judgment, because you're righteousness is as filthy rags. You have nothing to commend yourself of. Paul will point out throughout his writings that in order to commend yourself to God, you only have to do two things. First of all, in every action that you take the motions of your heart must be right before God. And then in every outward action it must be strictly in accord with His law. So, when your boss' wife made a snippy remark to you, and you bit your tongue, and you called her every name in the book in your heart, but you were nice to her outwardly, that was not a good deed. Not ultimately in the sight of God, because God knew your heart. God knew what you were thinking. God knew what you were doing. So, even when your outward righteousness looks nice, it's not in the eyes of God. And the apostle Paul is saying, "You are not the moral person that you think you are. And in the end you will be condemned."

And then there's a word that God has to earnest believers, believers who know that they struggle with hypocrisy. Now there are only two types of people in the world. There are hypocrites that don't know that they are, and there are hypocrites who do know they are. And the apostle here says, "Look, to you earnest believers, to you true believers, you are witnesses." The Gentiles are watching. It's very interesting. The Bible doesn't say, please be a witness for Jesus. The Bible says, you are witnesses. So the question is, are you a good one or a bad one? Those are the only options. Your witness, good or bad. And Paul is reminding us here that we are witnesses, and, therefore, we ought to make it count.

The most important preparation for evangelism is discipleship. Just as the greatest impediment to evangelism is professed Christians, claimed Christians, who aren't disciples, in fact, so also the most important preparation for evangelism is discipleship. The most important hours of the week, every week, in preparation for evangelism, the Lord's Day morning, the Lord's Day evening, under the house of God, in the house of God, with the people of God, doing discipleship. And all the other things that come along with Christian discipleship. And earnest believers ought to realize this. We are witnesses, and our lives will speak volumes. Share the gospel with everyone, one Christian has said. Use

words, if necessary. You are witnesses. That is what God has made you. Your witness will either drive away from Christ, or it will draw to.

Finally, there may be some hypocritical believers in our midst. Those who have professed faith in Christ but those who are not living as if they really cared more than anything else about the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, those who have really not experienced the transforming power of the new birth, those who are alien in their experience of the grace of God. And Paul has a word for you. And his word is not, "straighten up and fly right."

It's very interesting, isn't it, that Paul's whole point here is that there are a bunch of people out there that don't practice what they preach. It's very interesting that his conclusion to that is not, "therefore, straighten up and practice what you preach." Why does he not say that? Because he knows that they can't do that. They can't straighten up and fly right. They can't practice what they preach, because they've never been born again. Only the spirit can straighten out that kind of a hypocrite. He knew, he had been one. He'd been changed, and so his word is, "Come to Christ. Confess, repent, come to your senses, snap out of it, see yourself, see your sin, flee to Christ."

There are all sorts of people in churches today who don't want to do that because it would be embarrassing. So many people would find out that I've been a hypocrite. You see they would rather make sure that we like them than that they're at peace with God. We respect them. We think highly of them. They have an appearance of being Christian rather than, in fact, having a saving relationship with Christ. And that would be a tremendous tragedy.

First of all, because you would find, my dear hypocritical friends, that if you were, in fact, to trust in Christ truly, those of us who have been saved by grace would actually rejoice. We would think it was the most wonderful thing on earth. You know, hypocrites have been among the greatest evangelists in the history of the church. Let me share with you the story of one such hypocrite. "When I was sixteen years of age, I began to fast twice a week for thirty-six hours together. I prayed many times a day. I received the sacrament every Lord's day. I fasted myself almost to death during the forty days of lent, during which I made it a point of duty never to go less than three times a day to public worship, besides seven times a day to private prayers, and yet I knew no more that I was to be born again in God, born a new creature in Christ Jesus than if I'd never been born at all. I must bear testimony that my old friend, Charles Wesley, put a book into my hands called *The Life of God and the Soul of Man*, whereby God showed me I must be born again or damned. I know the place, it may be superstitious perhaps, but whenever I go to Oxford, I cannot help running to that place where Jesus Christ first revealed himself to me and gave me the new birth. How my heart did rise. How my heart shuttered like a poor man that is afraid to look back in his account books, lest he should find himself bankrupt. And yet, shall I burn that book? Shall I throw it down? Shall I put by it? Shall I search into it? I did,

holding my book in my hand, and I addressed the God of heaven and earth, and I said Lord if I'm not a Christian, if I'm not a real one, God, for Jesus Christ's sake, show me what Christianity is that I may not be damned at last. I read a little bit further. Oh, says the author, that they know anything of religion know that it is a vital union with the Son of God. Christ formed in the heart. Oh, what a ray of divine light that broke upon my soul. From that moment God has been carrying on His blest work in my soul, and now that I'm fifty-five years of age, I tell you brethren, I am more and more convinced that this is the truth of God, and that without it you can never be saved by Jesus Christ." That was George Whitfield.

Thank God for that hypocrite. Thank God for His saving grace to change that hypocrite into one of the great leaders of the great awakening. Maybe, dear hypocritical friend, maybe God will meet you in His word this day. I trust He will. May the Lord bless His word. Let us pray.

Our Lord and our God, when we pause to contemplate the blackness of our hearts, all of us shutter at the reality of hypocrisy. What can we do but come to You, O Christ, true Son of God and man, and cast ourselves at Your feet and beg for Your mercy and ask that by Your grace you would draw us into a vital relationship with You that would change our life, our priorities, and above all else our standing with God. This we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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