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Sunday, March 20, 2022

## Romans 2:17-24      “The Problem with Religious People”

Intro. In our last message we saw the truth that even the person who does not have the Bible has sinned and is accountable to God. That’s because they have sinned against the laws of God written on their hearts and as revealed in society, and they have sinned against their conscience. But what about the religious person who *does* know about the one true God, and even possesses the Bible? One would think that they are saved just because of the fact that they have a connection to the true faith. Well in this text of Scripture Paul specifically addresses the Jew. He wants them to understand that just because they are Jews, and just because they are the guardians and teachers of the Law, that does not mean they have eternal life. In fact, he accuses his fellow Jews of succumbing to a number of problems that are common with religious people. And so the title of my message today is, “The Problem with Religious People.” As I am preaching to this audience, I would think that most people would consider us to be religious. Most in my audience attend church religiously. But we who are active in a religious faith, if we are not careful, we can succumb to the same kind of problems that the Jews had.

This morning I want to share with you four problems that are all too common among religious people, whether Christian or Jew. I want us to search our hearts, and make sure we are not guilty of these same problems. If we do see some of these same problems in our lives, then we need to make corrections now, while we still have the opportunity.

The first problem I want to point out from our text is that:

### I. RELIGIOUS PEOPLE MAY BE GUILTY OF SPIRITUAL PRIDE

Pride is one of the worst of sins, and pride is one of the sins that religious people can be guilty of. Pride was the sin of Lucifer and led to his fall. In Proverbs 6:16-17 God says, “There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him:” Do you know what heads the list? It is “haughty eyes” or “A proud look” (NKJV).

Is there any evidence that the Jews were guilty of spiritual pride?<sup>1</sup> Indeed, there are several indications in our text. In v.17 Paul wrote, “But if you call yourself a Jew ... and boast in God.” Though some Gentiles would use the name “Jew” with scorn, the Jews themselves wore that designation with honor and pride. After all, the name “Jew” comes from “Judah” which means “praise.” They were the favored descendants of Abraham. They had been chosen by God from *all* the nations of the earth, and King David was of the tribe of Judah. Thus, they viewed themselves as God’s favorites (cf. v.11). They would also boast (*kauchaomai*) in the One true God, which was not wrong in and of itself (Isa. 45:25; Jer. 9:23-24; 1 Cor 1:31). This included the idea that they would boast that their God was the only true God. They would boast of their special relationship to the one true God. We tend to boast about our connections to prominent people. How much more would the Jews boast of their special connection to the one true God!

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<sup>1</sup> Pride was included in the list of sins Jesus gave to the Jews in Mark 7:22. Cf. also Mt. 23:12, “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” Jesus repeated this quotation in reference to the Pharisee in Luke 18:14.

Another reason they tended to be prideful was due to their knowledge of spiritual truth. The Jews were blessed as being the first recipients of the Scriptures. It is God's Word, and not merely the words of men. What a privilege to have received this special revelation from God! They not only received the Scriptures, but notice that Paul says in v.18 that they were "instructed from the Law." That rarely used Greek word used for "instructed" (*katecheo*) is the one from which we get our word "catechism." It refers to thorough instruction (*kata* prefix intensifies the verb). They were often taught the Law in an orderly, regular manner from childhood (2 Tim. 3:15) and each Sabbath in the synagogue. Here's the problem: Paul said in 1 Cor. 8:1, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." So their possession and knowledge of the Law of God was something they were very proud of. In fact, Paul said in v.23, "You who boast in the law...."

Indeed, the Jews were quite proud of the Law God had given them, for knowledge of God's Word can be very beneficial. We read of this in v.18. Paul says "and know his will and approve what is excellent...." So when a person is instructed from the Law of God, Paul mentions two blessings that come from that:

First, by it we know God's will. "His" is not in the Greek text. Instead, it actually has the definite article, "the will." Paul has in mind the will that is most important, the will of God. God is your Sovereign Creator and Judge. If you are a Christian, He is also your Redeemer. You *should* seek to know and do His will, for Romans 12:2 says it is "good and acceptable and perfect." You can learn God's will from the Bible. Doing the will of God is the pathway of blessing. Going against His will only leads to ruin. Have you learned that?

Another blessing we receive from knowing the Bible is this: We can distinguish "what is excellent." The word for "approve" (*dokimazo*) means to recognize as genuine after examination or testing. The two Greek words translated "what is excellent" means primarily "things that differ", usually in the sense of what excels in value (as here, since it fits the context; cf. also Php. 1:10). The Word of God will help you distinguish between what is valuable<sup>2</sup> and what is worthless, between right and wrong. It will give you the ability to recognize what is best and reject what is not good or bad. The Word of God gives us wisdom in making the right decisions and avoiding foolish decisions. It is invaluable in helping you to make right moral judgments.

So the Jews were blessed with knowledge of spiritual truth. And we have certainly been blessed even more, and we should be thankful for the Jews who passed down these blessings to us. We have the New Testament also. Most homes in America have several Bibles. We are a very literate people, and the vast majority of us can read the Bible for ourselves. We have access to many Bible teachers and preachers who can help us learn God's Word. We can know God's will. We can benefit from God's wisdom found in Scripture to help us make wise choices.

So as we have seen, knowledge of God's Word should be a great blessing. But as we have seen, it can lead to pride. I believe this prideful attitude comes out in vv.19-20. Paul said, "and if you are sure 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 children, having in the law the embodiment<sup>3</sup> of knowledge and truth." God called them to be a missionary nation (Gen. 22:17-18). They were to be a guide, a light<sup>4</sup>, an instructor, and a teacher to those who do not know God's truth. But they could hardly hide their arrogant attitude of superiority toward Gentiles. They viewed *them* as

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<sup>2</sup> See use of the word in Matthew 6:26; 10:31; 12:12; Luke 12:7, 24.

<sup>3</sup> Why does Paul use the word "embodiment" or "form" (*morphosis*) here? It's not that Paul is saying that they only had what appeared to be the truth of God (as in 2 Tim. 3:5). There is no suggestion of semblance or unreality. Here it refers to the formulation or framework of the Truth in the written Law.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Isa. 42:6-7.

spiritually blind. They believed that Gentiles were in spiritual darkness. They viewed Gentiles as foolish. This word (*aphron*) literally refers to those who are not thinking, or incapable of thinking. The Jews actually considered most Gentiles to be senseless, stupid, and foolish. They also viewed them as unlearned as babes or young children. So all the terms that applied to the Jews were self-praising but the terms used to describe the Gentiles conveyed their low opinion of them. Many Jewish texts from that time showed this attitude was typical.

As a result of all of this, they viewed themselves as better than the rest of mankind. Jewish pride often alienated the Gentiles to whom they were supposed to minister as a priest-nation (Ex. 19:5-6).

We need to be careful about spiritual pride in our own lives. We need to be careful that we do not convey a “holier than thou” or “smarter than you” attitude. If you are a Christian teacher, the point of the lesson is not to show how smart you are. It’s not about you. It’s about God, His saving grace, and how we should live. The way we maintain humility is to remember, “There go I but for the grace of God.” Our knowledge, and the spiritual blessings we enjoy, are gifts of God’s grace. We do not deserve them. And when we remember how big God is, and how small we are, we should walk humbly before our God. So don’t let your knowledge and privileges as a Christian lead to spiritual pride.

Another problem I see from our text is this:

## II. RELIGIOUS PEOPLE MAY HAVE MISPLACED TRUST

Paul says in v.17, “But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law...” The Jew rests, leans upon (*epanapauomai*<sup>5</sup>) the Law. This is the language of trust and reliance. They thought that because they possessed the Law and sought to keep the Law, they would attain eternal life. The story of the rich young ruler is an example of that. They also relied upon the fact that they were Jews and had so many spiritual advantages. They assumed that they would be spared the judgment of God, pretty much regardless of how they lived. But Paul stated in v.13 that “it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.” Paul also points out that all the privileges and prerogatives the Jew enjoyed only aggravated his condemnation if he failed to carry into effect the teaching of the Law which he instilled to others.

Today, what Paul says here applies to all people who live in the lands of the open Bible. Instead of calling ourselves Jews, we gladly call ourselves Christians. We own a Bible. In fact, most of us own several Bibles. And quite a few of these same people rest and rely on their church membership, their baptism, and their church attendance. They take communion and they may even serve in the church. They are proud of the fact that they worship the one true God. But all of this will not save you! As we will see from this text, having a rich, spiritual heritage is not enough. Paul demonstrates that being religious will not save you. Even outward conformity to the practices of the *true* faith will not save you. Too many religious people have ritual without redemption, they profess, but do not possess Jesus in their hearts. The profession of religion, even though it be divinely revealed religion, is not enough. The one who professes the religion must be transformed by it by repentance and faith. Jesus said in Mt. 7:21-23, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will

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<sup>5</sup> Used only here and Lk. 10:6.

declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” So what we have in our text is a warning to any man who puts his trust in religion, or who thinks that his church can save him, or who hopes that formal acceptance and affirmation of a creed will save him. Furthermore, the practice of rites and ceremonies will not save him. Don’t trust in religion; trust in Jesus, the Savior!

Yet another problem I see in our text is that:

### III. RELIGIOUS PEOPLE OFTEN ARE GUILTY OF HYPOCRISY

As we have seen from vv.18-20, many Jews were in a position to be teachers of the Law. Now they would need to be ready to answer the penetrating questions that Paul had for them, which can be summarized this way, “Are you a doer of the Law? Do you practice what you preach?” You see, it was not the possession of the Law that counted, but the practice of the Law (v.13). Paul will demonstrate that, in spite of their advantages, they stood condemned before God. After all, there are times when even the best of them fail to practice what they preach. So they are not only guilty of breaking God’s law, but they are also guilty of the serious sin of hypocrisy. The strongest preaching of Jesus was against those who were hypocrites. 14 times in Matthew’s gospel Jesus called certain religious leaders “hypocrites” (esp. chapter 23). Do you want to be a hypocrite? Of course not! The consequences of being a hypocrite, especially when you are a preacher, teacher, or parent can be serious. After all, hypocrisy is one form of lying. Religious hypocrisy is a major stumbling block as we reach out to unbelievers. Hypocrisy only adds to a person’s condemnation on Judgment Day.

Now consider with me:

A. One Key Principle to Avoid Hypocrisy – This is stated in v.21, “you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself?” The Greek word translated “not” (*ou*) demands an affirmative answer. “Yes, of course you should teach yourself.” Those of us who are teachers of the Bible should be sure that we first teach the Bible to ourselves.

Of course, the main lesson here is that we should practice what we preach! One way we achieve that goal is to make sure you first teach and apply biblical truth to your *own* life. So before you present your lesson or sermon to others, you should first present it to yourself. Ask, “Am I obeying this principle or command of God’s Word?” This will help us identify with the needs and struggles of our audience. Yet too often, as we prepare our sermons or lessons, we are thinking about how the biblical text will be directed to the audience. We’re thinking, “Boy, those people sure need to hear this!” Likewise, parents, before you tell your children what they ought to do, first make sure *you* are doing it.

B. Examples of Hypocrisy – Paul mentions 3 sins that were at times practiced among the Jews, even though they are expressly prohibited in the 10 commandments. For example, some were guilty of:

1. Stealing – Paul says in the last of v.21, “While you preach against stealing, do you steal?” Stealing is all too common because people tend to be greedy and covetous. That causes some to get money or possessions in a less than honorable or unlawful way. There are other ways to steal besides theft or robbery. Jews who lived in the cities of the Roman Empire tended to be merchants and bankers and they had a reputation for using every cunning device to part their customers from their wealth. For example, have you ever engaged in a business

transaction and you felt like you had just been robbed? Josephus tells about some Jews who persuaded a noble Roman lady to make a large contribution to the temple in Jerusalem, and they turned around and kept that money for themselves. That's stealing! Furthermore, on the other side, if you do not pay your just debts, that is a form of stealing.

Cheryl's mom and dad used to run a community grocery store for many years. Back then people would charge their groceries to the ledger sheet that was maintained at the store. It wasn't long after I met Cheryl that I heard her dad say that he had quite a few deacons, and even preachers, who did not pay their grocery bills. In many cases it was not that they could not, but that they *would* not. That's hypocrisy! No doubt they have preached or spoken against stealing, and yet they were stealing from Cheryl's parents by not paying their debts. (I could give other examples such as extortion, embezzlement and even failing to give tithes to God (Mal. 3:8)).

2. Adultery – Paul said in v.22, “You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?” The Talmud charged three of its most illustrious rabbis with the crime of adultery (Vincent). It is so sad that there have been so many prominent preachers who have been exposed for committing adultery in the last 40 years. No small number of Catholic priests have been convicted of child molestation. Don't be a hypocrite. Practice what you preach!

Hypocrisy is not unique to the church setting. Do you remember the fact that NY Governor Eliot Spitzer, who had aggressively prosecuted prostitution rings as Attorney General, was himself involved in the very same thing! By the way, during the pandemic too many politicians were exposed for their hypocrisy regarding masks, etc.

3. Association with Idolatry – Paul also said in the last of v.22, “You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?” Since the town-clerk at Ephesus defended Paul and his colleagues against the charge of robbing temples<sup>6</sup> (Acts 19:37), we must conclude that Jews occasionally would go into pagan temples and destroy idols, and perhaps steal them for their gold and silver content.<sup>7</sup> They probably justified it on the grounds that they were attacking idolatry. Yet this was expressly forbidden of the Jews (Josephus, Antiquities IV, 8, 10) because of the supposed defilement that such contact with idolatry would bring. So Paul convicts some of abhorring idols on the one hand, but defiling themselves with idols on the other hand.<sup>8</sup>

The main point that Paul is making is that fact that we all have at times not practiced what we have preached. The very Law that the Jews relied upon for salvation did not empower them to obey. Instead, it only indicted them and pronounced them “Guilty”! And their guilt was increased by their hypocrisy. To steal and to commit adultery are great sins, but for those who preach against them and condemn them in others, then to commit them is to perhaps quadruple their guilt. The Jews who committed these sins were guilty in the sight of God more than the heathen. Thus, they need a Savior just as much or more than the heathen! Yet most Jews would not have viewed their situation that way.

So let us guard against hypocrisy in our own lives. 1 Peter 2:1 says we should lay aside “all deceit, hypocrisy....”

Finally, yet another problem that is indicated by our text is:

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<sup>6</sup> This is the same word that Paul uses in v.22, but in its noun form.

<sup>7</sup> Idol temples were used as depositories for banks. That's because those who feared the gods would not rob from their temples. It is less likely that they robbed such bank deposits.

<sup>8</sup> Some commentators expand this to include robbing from the temple of the true God, but this seems unlikely, for it is related to “abhorring idols.”

#### IV. OUR ACTIONS MAY BRING REPROACH UPON OUR GOD

This is seen in v.23, “You who boast in the law dishonor (*atimazo*) God by breaking the law.” We are supposed to honor God, give praise and glory to God, and lead others to do so. But when we sin, we dishonor Him, and bring reproach upon His name.

In v.24 we see why sin, especially hypocrisy, dishonors God. There Paul wrote, “For ‘the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,’ as it is written.” Here Paul is quoting from Isa. 52:5 (LXX, “free” quotation) to prove his point (cf. also Ezek. 36:20, 23). The Jews were to be a missionary nation and lead the Gentiles to seek the one true God, and believe in Him, and praise Him. But instead, too often the Gentiles blasphemed the God of the Jews. Why? It is because the pagan Gentiles had daily contact with the Jews in business and other activities, and they were not fooled by the Jews’ devotion to the Law. They saw too many examples of hypocrisy.

Let us remember that God is Spirit; He is invisible. He cannot be seen directly with human eyes. Jews had no idol to represent God. The only image some people will have of God is what they see in the lives of those who profess to believe in the one true God. So what kind of mental image would pagan Gentiles have from the kind of Jew that is described in our text? Too often Gentiles have blasphemed the name of our God because of the kind of living some Jews were engaged in. Immoral or dishonest Jewish conduct gave the impression to the Gentiles that the Jews had a wicked and immoral God. Furthermore, Barclay points out that the Gentiles detested the spectacle of a race of people living as a kind of separate and specially privileged nation.<sup>9</sup> The Gentiles especially did not like the cold contempt that Jews had for Gentiles and their religions. It is hard to be a missionary when you display contempt for other people. The Jews also tended to reserve charity and courtesy only to fellow Jews.

These verses reflect an important principle. Our lives reflect the kind of God we believe in and serve. We expect a pagan to live like a pagan. After all, their gods were sinful like men. Immorality and drunkenness were actually part of their religious rituals! At times they would even murder women or children by sacrificing them to their gods. So I don’t expect followers of pagan religion to be morally upright. We expect certain followers of Allah to take the sword and exterminate their enemies in wholesale carnage. Some radical followers of Islam have detonated bombs that led to the deaths of hundreds and thousands of people, including women and children. After all, the god of Islam is different from the God and Father of the Lord Jesus. We are not surprised at the behavior of the atheist. After all, if there is no God, there are no moral absolutes. Atheistic communist leaders have murdered millions of people.

But we who profess to believe in the God of holiness and love, how shall we then live? We should live like Jesus commanded. We should live holy and pure lives. We who believe in a God of love, should live loving lives. Jesus said in Matt. 5:16, “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” Otherwise, the name of our God will be blasphemed among non-Christians.

Sadly, the organized church has failed too often in this regard in the same way as the Jewish nation. Cruelty and murder were practiced in the name of Christ during the Inquisition. Discrimination was practiced against African-Americans for many years even within the church. Fundamentalists Christians are supposed to be known for being strictly faithful in their doctrine and practice. However, too many are better known for being unloving, mean-spirited, and divisive. In over 45 years of ministry, I have known of some rather mean-spirited so-called

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<sup>9</sup> They were even exempted from military service due to their Sabbath laws.

Christians. I know of a church that had such an angry and divisive business meeting that the police had to be called! What kind of testimony did that church have in the community? Professing Christians all too often live ungodly lives on the job and in the community. When that happens, what kind of reaction should we expect from unbelievers? Are they going to praise God or slander God? The world always judges the Lord by what it sees in His people.

Once when John MacArthur was visiting a jail, he met a prisoner who was quite vocal about his being a Christian. When asked if he had been converted while in prison, he answered no. When he told him that he was jailed for ignoring 30 or so parking tickets, Dr. MacArthur strongly suggested that he not advertise the fact he was a Christian. His life was a testimony *against* Christ.<sup>10</sup>

On the positive side, this verse reminds us of our obligation to be a positive witness for the Lord to the glory of His name.

Conclusion: Someone has written a simple poem that expresses the truth that we see here. It goes like this:

The gospel is written a chapter a day  
By deeds that you do and words that you say.  
Men read what you say, whether faithless or true.  
Say, what is the gospel according to you?

Someone said that there are times when our lives are speaking so loudly that they are not hearing our verbal witness for the Lord.

I believe that Paul has demonstrated that the religious Jew, or the person who has grown up in a Christian home, has sinned. None of us have perfectly kept the Law or followed all of the teachings of our faith. Your spiritual advantages will not save you. You need a Savior just as much as anyone else. Jesus is the Savior of the world. He is the One who died on the cross to pay the penalty of our sins. Don't trust in your spiritual heritage to save you. Don't trust in your religion, church, or minister to save you. Instead, trust in Jesus. Only He can bring forgiveness and peace to your soul. Will you trust in Him today?

What about those of us who are saved? We need to be careful to avoid the problems of spiritual pride, hypocrisy and bringing reproach upon the name of our God by how we speak or live. Let us repent of such sins and look to God in faith to forgive us and enable us to live as He would have us to live.

Sources: William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957); Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952); F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Hershel Hobbs, *Romans: A Verse by Verse Study* (Waco: Word Books, 1977); Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950 reprint); H.A. Ironside, *Lectures on Romans* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1928); Halford E. Luccock, *Preaching Values in the Epistles of Paul*, Vol. 1 [Romans, 1 Cor.] (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959); J. W. MacGorman, *Layman's Bible Book Commentary*, Vol. 20 (Nashville: Broadman, 1980); Leon McBeth, *Exegetical & Practical Commentary on Romans* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1937); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: Romans* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931, accessed through *Online Bible*); Harold B. Sighthler, *Romans* (Greenville, SC: Tabernacle Baptist

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<sup>10</sup> John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Hebrews* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983).

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