

Hypocrisy and the Glory of God: Romans 2:17-24

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This morning we're going to talk about hypocrisy and the glory of God. That's what this passage of Scripture deals with in Romans 2. Paul rebukes the Jews for their hypocrisy, and He points out why hypocrisy is such a serious thing, namely, because it is an offense to the glory of God. So the two headings I'll use are: first of all, hypocrisy, and then secondly, the glory of God.

In chapter 2 Paul has been addressing the moralist, the legalist, the judgmental, self-righteous person who is oblivious to his or her own sin. It seems that Paul has had mainly the Jews in mind here, whereas he had mainly Gentiles in mind in chapter 1:18-32.

But now, in 2:17, Paul comes out and addresses the Jew directly. And in these two remaining paragraphs of the chapter, he's going to deal with two things that are very precious to the Jew, two things that are at the very core of how Jews would identify themselves. The first is the law, which is the focus of verses 17-24, and the other is circumcision, which is the focus of verses 25-29 (the text for next week's sermon).

Now, there's an important thing for us to recognize as we begin this morning. This text is a rebuke toward Jews, but that doesn't mean Gentiles are off the hook. And it certainly doesn't mean that Gentiles can look down on Jews for their hypocrisy. Do you see how ironic that would be, if Gentiles were to read this passage and say, "Yeah, those hypocritical Jews. They've really got a problem. I'm glad I'm not one of them." That would be ridiculous. Because that attitude would, itself, be hypocrisy.

The end of chapter 1 described many blatant, outward sins of the Gentile world. At the beginning of chapter 2 Paul turned to the Jews to tell them not to judge, because they're sinful, too. Now, if Gentiles were to judge Jews, this cycle of hypocrisy would come full circle.

We had a good discussion about these things at our men's gathering on Tuesday morning. And Jay made an insightful comment, that a person is not necessarily just in one category or the other. I said last week that we're all sinners, but there are different categories of sinners whom Paul addresses here. There are those who run headlong into various kinds of outward sins, like the ones listed in chapter 1. We might call that group the

libertines. And then Paul addresses another category of sinner in chapter 2, which we could call the legalists.

And Jay said, I think it's possible to be both at the same time. And I think he's exactly right. A person can be living a dissolute, immoral life, and at the same time be judging others for their sins. And then Troy observed that in the culture there are fads that come through in terms of virtues and vices. Certain causes become hip, while many things which the Bible calls sin are simply not seen as wrong at all. So a guy might be sleeping with his girlfriend, and he doesn't see any problem with that whatsoever even though the Bible says it's wrong, but then he looks at people who don't recycle, or don't buy organic, and he thinks they're from the devil.

The simple point I want to make as we begin this study this morning is that hypocrisy is not a Jewish problem, it's a human problem. And we shouldn't ever use this passage, or any passage like it, in order to ridicule Jews. What we each need to do is see this as a rebuke of our own lives. This shouldn't make us think about other people who are hypocrites. It should make us think about our own lives. In what ways am I being hypocritical? In what ways am I judgmental? In what ways do I have a self-righteous, arrogant attitude? So my hope is that these verses will provoke us toward self-examination. I hope that we'll be convicted of inconsistencies in our lives.

And I hope the end result will be a renewed desire to seek God for who He is, and pursue our joy in Him. Because Christianity isn't about propping ourselves up above other people so we can look down on them. Christianity is about the Gospel, which is the Good News that Jesus died and rose again to save hell-deserving sinners like me. And if we really get that, then we won't care who appears holier, or more spiritual, or who gets the most applause from other people. We'll just be basking in the wonder of God's grace to us. That's the humble and happy place I hope we can all find ourselves today.

Hypocrisy (vv. 17-22)

Notice in verses 17-22 how Paul points out the hypocrisy of these Jews. And remember, this applies to us as well. Those of us in evangelical churches are so prone to these same things. The Jews have all these blessings, which Paul points out. They have the law. They know God's will. And they've also been given a responsibility to share this with the world. They are to be a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children. Do we not have similar blessings

and a similar calling? We have the Bible. We know God's revealed will to humanity. And we are commanded to proclaim these things to the nations.

Up through verse 20 all of this is right and good. Verses 17-20 describe these good things which God has given to the Jews, and the calling He has placed on them to be a witness to the world. The problem comes in verses 21-22. Here's where the issue of hypocrisy comes to the forefront. Because it's certainly not a bad thing to boast in God and know His will and approve what is excellent. Nor is it a bad thing to feel the God-given responsibility to share these good things with those who haven't yet heard.

But there *is* a problem when those who have been blessed with a knowledge of God's ways and have been commissioned to teach others, fail to teach themselves. There *is* a problem when people think that hearing God's Word, and knowing His Word, and maybe also teaching His Word, is all that really matters. You don't actually need to live it. Remember the passage we looked at last week. Verse 13 makes the crucial point that hearing the law doesn't matter at all if you don't do it!

And now he's still pressing that point. Is this all just outward? Is it just stuff you know in your head and speak with your mouth and impose on others? Or is it something you apply to yourself? That's verse 21, "you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself?" This is hypocrisy: teaching these things to others, imposing expectations on others, when the weight of this instruction has not even penetrated my own soul.

Verse 21 is the big picture idea of hypocrisy (you're teaching others, but you're not even teaching yourself), and then Paul spells it out in more detail in the next three statements. He mentions stealing, adultery, and robbing temples. It's hard to get a real clear picture of the extent to which these things were going on in the Jewish community in Paul's day. But apparently they were. Of course, we think of the Sermon on the Mount and how Jesus taught that even if you don't do a sin outwardly (like murder or adultery), you are still guilty of sin even in your thoughts and attitudes (like anger and lust). It might be that Paul is thinking along similar lines, and he wants the Jews to realize that, even if they haven't actually stolen or committed adultery or robbed temples, that they are still guilty of such sins in their thoughts and attitudes.

But it may also be the case that Paul actually knew of these things happening among the Jews. That would make more sense in the way he presents the rebuke. He's talking about things the Jews

condemn: stealing, adultery, idols. It would make the most sense, in a straight-forward, literal reading to understand Paul to be saying that some Jews, even as they have explicitly preached against these sins, are engaged in those very sins themselves. He's not saying that all Jews are doing this. But he's pointing out this hypocrisy among them, that there are those who show an outward allegiance to the law, but who violate that same law.

Illustration from Mark 7

To further define and illustrate what Paul is talking about here, I want to go to another passage where Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. In Mark 7, the Pharisees and scribes were asking Jesus why His disciples didn't wash their hands according to the tradition of the elders. Here's how Jesus responded. "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me . . .'"

He calls them hypocrites. It's a word that comes from the theater, where the actors would wear various masks as they played different parts. It means pretender. So when it is used outside of the theater context, it refers to a duplicitous, insincere person. It's a very strong rebuke that Jesus is leveling against the Pharisees and scribes. They come as religious overachievers, looking down their noses at Jesus and His disciples, and Jesus tells them that they're just a bunch of poseurs. They posture themselves as the super spiritual heroes of society. Puffed up with pride, they think that they are setting the pace for true religion. They think that their lives serve as the very definition of true worship. And Jesus tells them, your so-called worship is no worship at all. It's empty. It's vain. You're just pretenders.

The words of Isaiah 29:13, which Jesus quotes there, provide a really helpful definition of hypocrisy. "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me . . ." As Isaiah's words describe, hypocrisy involves giving lip-service to God. It involves external things. There is an outward form of worship. But it is only pretending. It is merely external, because the heart remains far from God. That's the key to the definition of hypocrisy there. There is lip-service, but no heartfelt worship. It is empty and vain, because the heart is not in it.

Here's where each of needs to do some honest introspection and ask for God to reveal our hypocrisy and convict us of it. We need to pray that God will work in our hearts to give us a greater passion for Him. That's what we need. We need to be

overwhelmed with His goodness and grace to us. That's when we'll be engaged in real worship, and not just lip-service.

I was convicted of this last week when I was reading *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, in preparation for our study in the adult Sunday School class. I was reading from chapter 3 about the need to foster in our children a Godward orientation. And Tedd Tripp asks the question, "How can you deepen your experience of the pleasures of knowing God, so that you can reflect to your children in deeper measure the joys of communion and fellowship with the living God?" And then he writes, "One of the most powerful ways that you can show your children the glories of God, whose greatness no one can fathom, is by finding delight in Him yourself."¹

And as I thought about that, I was convicted of times when I pray with my kids, and I'm just going through the motions. Or times when we're doing family devotions, and I'm just going through the motions. I don't want our kids to think that our faith is just a matter of bowing our heads before meals and saying a few words to God, or reading a Bible story after dinner. I want them to see in their parents a real passion for the Lord.

So Tedd Tripp's words are a real encouragement to me. I need to shepherd the hearts of my children, not just try to modify their behavior. And in order to shepherd their hearts, I need to be examining my own heart.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones makes some good observations about hypocrisy. I'll mention these points that he made in his sermon on this text, and hopefully these insights will help us detect the hypocrisy in our own lives, and the ways that we are susceptible to this. First of all, he says that "a hypocrite is one who tends to take only a general and theoretical and intellectual interest in truth."² And he rightly points out that preachers and teachers are especially in danger in this regard. For any of us who teach God's Word to others, there is the danger of analyzing and dissecting portions of Scripture simply for the purpose of putting together a sermon or a lesson that sounds nice and pleases the group. We must not let the Word remain out there in the theoretical. It's not just something to talk about. It's not just something to analyze. It's not just something to teach. It must impact our lives. Anything we preach or teach to others, we must first preach and teach to ourselves.

¹ *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, Parent Handbook, page 22.

² Romans, Exposition of Chapters 2:1 – 3:20, pages 144-46

Lloyd-Jones says that “the second general characteristic [of the hypocrite] is a kind of complacency . . . He is always self-satisfied, always pleased with himself, and never conscious of any deficiency. There is never any humility about the hypocrite.” It takes humility to recognize that we are not as we should be. It takes humility to acknowledge that I am seriously flawed and sinful, and I desperately need help. It takes humility to be broken, which is where we need to be. A person who is not broken over his or her sin is a person who will not be interested in the Gospel. But when we realize we’re sinners in need of a Savior, that’s when all pretenses evaporate, and we fall on our knees before the cross, pleading for mercy.

The third and final thing Lloyd-Jones mentions is this: “the hypocrite is a man who, obviously, for all these reasons, never examines himself, because he has never seen the need for self-examination.” I hope all of this will lead us toward self-examination. I pray that we’ll consider these things in terms of our own lives. Not ranking in your head a top ten list of the most hypocritical people you know. But looking into your own life, your thoughts, your actions, your motivations, your desires, and asking God to show you where those things just don’t line up with what you say you believe.

The Glory of God (vv. 23-24)

Now let’s talk about the glory of God. What is the connection between God’s glory and the hypocrisy of His people? Look at verses 23-24. “You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.’” Again, here’s the problem of being hearers of the law, but not doers. Paul rebukes the Jews for being so proud that they possess the law, but they hypocritically break the very law they boast in.

And the most important thing to see in this paragraph is that treating God’s Word this way dishonors Him. Think about how this dishonors God. Think about how it tramples His glory in the dirt. When God’s people take His Word and treat it like a good luck charm rather than a loving message from our Father, that is offensive to Him. He didn’t give us His Word as a good luck charm—as long as you have this, you’ll magically be OK. No!

Or imagine if a king sent an important letter to one of the citizens of his kingdom, telling him to carry out an important task. But when the citizen receives the letter, he just runs around telling everyone, “Hey, I got a letter from the king!” But he doesn’t bother to do what the letter says. That dishonors the king.

And that's what we do when we pride ourselves in being Bible-believers, but we don't actually strive to live according to what the Bible says. Like we read in the book of James: "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing." (James 1:22-25)

We don't want to be people who read the Bible and listen to sermons and go to Bible studies, but then go away and forget what we learned. We want to put it into practice. This is a loving letter from our Father, telling us how He has redeemed us through the blood of His Son, and telling us how to live in a way that will bring us closer to Him. That's what we should want, more than anything else.

A very tangible way that God is dishonored through the hypocrisy of His people is in the way that the world perceives God based on the behavior of those who claim allegiance to Him. It's as though God is guilty by association. God, of course, is perfect and holy. But when people who say that they belong to Him, and claim to be following Him, but are mean and nasty and judgmental and hypocritical, then the world is going to say, "I don't want to have anything to do with their God."

That's Paul's point in verse 24 where he quotes from Isaiah 52. The situation in Isaiah 52 is that the Jews had been taken into exile because of their sin, and the Gentiles thought less of God because of that. The Lord says, "continually all the day my name is despised." And in Ezekiel 36:22 there's a similar statement. The Lord says, "It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came." The point here is that the world watches God's people and thus forms its opinion about God. This can happen negatively, like Paul is talking about in Romans 2.

Or it can happen positively, like Jesus exhorts in the Sermon on the Mount. He says in Matthew 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." People are watching us. Our children are watching us, family members, neighbors, co-workers. They're taking note of the things we say, and the way we act, and how we treat them. And folks are very good at sensing whether or not our actions are consistent with our words.

Our lives are on display for the world to see, and people will come to various conclusions about God based on what they see in us. If they see a person who is burdened by the chores of religion, always complaining about how busy they are doing all their nice, little church duties. Or if they see someone who regularly complements himself on all his righteous deeds and also regularly condemns all those sinners in the world. Or if they see someone who is downright mean, and unfriendly, and uncaring. What kind of impression will those things leave on people?

If you tried to look at yourself from the perspective of your neighbors or co-workers, how do you think they would characterize you? How would they characterize your Christianity? Would they think of you primarily in terms of the things you don't do? You don't watch certain movies, you don't read certain books, and there's a whole slew of things you don't let your kids do. If unbelievers look at our lives, and those are the main things they remember about us, that's probably an indicator that something's wrong. Our hope should be that they see our redeemed lives, that they see our genuine love for others, our concern for others, that they would see vibrant love in our marriages and families, and our love for one another in the church, and that they would see our deep and abiding love for God, even when things are not going well in our lives. I hope we'll be known for the things we *do*, and the things we *are*, not just all the things we don't do.

There are subtle ways and blatant ways that hypocrisy manifests itself. I don't know where you're at today, but I hope God is working in you to convict you and sanctify you. I want to speak to the young people for a moment, because I look back on some of my teenage years with great regret. During some of my years in middle school and high school, I was the classic hypocrite. Going to church, youth group, Bible studies. I knew a lot of the answers. I was very involved, and even recognized as one of the student leaders among the youth. But at the same time, I was involved in things I knew I shouldn't be doing. On Wednesday night I'd be at youth group, and on Friday night I'd be at an ungodly party.

And I look back on that and just think of what an idiot I was being. I wish I could get those years back, because I was dishonoring God with my double life. For those who knew the disconnect in my life, I shudder to think what they perceived about Christianity because of me.

So, young people, if that's you right now, I plead with you to repent. I plead with you to renounce your hypocrisy and make your life count for Christ. Don't be at peace with sin. Don't

dishonor God with your life. Don't have the mindset that you'll live for God when you're older. You have a life to live NOW! You can have an influence on the people around you NOW. You can have an impact on the world right NOW. So, please turn. Don't let one more minute of your life be wasted on the fleeting pleasures of this life. Seek for the joy that will last.

I'll close by posing two questions for all of us to ponder. Again, my desire in this whole sermon is that each of us would examine ourselves to see where hypocrisy lurks within us. Where are the disconnects between our theological affirmations and our daily living?

So here are two questions that we can ponder this week as we pray to God and try to apply this passage to our lives. First of all, is your focus on true worship, or on following rules? And the second question is basically the same—just worded a bit differently. Is your focus on really pursuing holiness, or on appearing holy in the eyes of those around you?

Do you see your Christian life as merely a list of rules to follow? Do you see your Christian life as a way to impress others with your spiritual maturity? That will get old fast. It also breeds spiritual pride. And it's the kind of thing that people look at and don't want to have anything to do with.

Instead, we should be looking to Christ and marveling at His grace to us. We should be searching the Word to see new and wonderful things about our God. We should be living to know Him better. We should be investing our time and energy and resources in ways that will give us more and more excitement in being part of what God is doing throughout the world. This is not about keeping a list of rules. This is not about trying to impress others. It's about enjoying God, and experiencing His goodness to us, and getting caught up in the adventure of taking this Good News to the nations.