

Romans: The Good News of God

And You Call Yourself a Christian?

Romans 2:17-24

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Scripture

Several years ago I was pulled over by a police officer for running a red light.

“Why did you do it?” he asked.

“Well, Officer,” I explained. “I am a pastor. One of the members of our church is about to have open heart surgery at Harrisburg General Hospital. I got off to a late start this morning, and I am trying to get to him before he goes into surgery.”

“Pastor,” said the officer, “you ought to know better! You know that running a red light is breaking the law! And you call yourself a Christian?”

Have you ever had that happen to you? Have you ever done something and had someone challenge your Christian profession?

In my discussions with people who profess to be Christians, I sometimes ask them why they think that God should let them into heaven. Some of the answers I get include the following:

- Because I obey the Ten Commandments.
- Because I love God.
- Because I try to do what God tells me to do in his Word.
- Because I have been in church all my life.
- Because I teach Sunday school.
- And so on. . . .

One danger that confronts religious people is that they rely on their performance to gain right standing with God. They think that God should accept them because of their good works.

This is exactly the same issue that the Apostle Paul addressed in our text for today. Paul noted that the Jews were trying to gain right standing with God because of their good works.

Let’s see how Paul put it in Romans 2:17-24:

¹⁷ Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; ¹⁸ if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; ¹⁹ if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— ²¹ you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? ²² You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? ²⁴ As it is written: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” (Romans 2:17-24)

Introduction

Paul began his letter to the Romans with greetings and a personal introduction (1:1-15).

Then he stated his theme for the letter, which is that the righteousness of God is received by faith (1:16-17).

The body of Paul’s letter began with a discussion of the sinfulness of the Gentiles (1:18-32). One can almost see the Jews nodding their heads in agreement with Paul.

Yes, they would have said, those Gentiles are sinners indeed. They certainly deserve the wrath of God.

Imagine the surprise of the Jews when Paul suddenly focused on their sinfulness (in 2:1-3:8)!

What? We are sinners? How can we be? Surely we have God’s favor? We belong to God.

Lesson

In our lesson today I want you to see that the danger that confronts religious people is that they rely on their performance to gain right standing with God. They think that God should accept them because of their good works.

I. The Religious Person's Plea Rendered (2:17-20)

First, I want you to notice the religious person's plea.

The religious person says, "I should be accepted by God because of my good works."

The Jewish people of Paul's day were very proud of their religion and their association with it. After all, they were **Jews**, they had **the law**, and they bragged about their **relationship with God**. In addition, they claimed to know God's **will** and approved what was superior because they were **instructed in the law**. They were convinced that they were **a guide for the blind, a light for those who were in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, and a teacher of infants, because they had in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth** (2:17-20).

This is an impressive resume. Who could doubt that they were not rightly related to God?

Obviously, the Apostle Paul did. He challenged the religious Jew and his thinking that he should be accepted by God because of his good works.

Paul challenges the religious person today too who thinks that he or she should be accepted by God because of his or her good works.

II. The Religious Person's Plea Refuted (2:21-24)

Paul refutes the religious person's plea by saying essentially, "You don't practice what you preach!"

He does so by asking several questions.

Paul asks in Romans 2:21: "**You who preach against stealing, do you steal?**"

So I ask *you*, "**You who preach against stealing, do you steal?**"

My son Jon's all-time favorite story about me, it seems, has to do with my breaking of the eighth commandment when I was a

teenager. He loves to hear me tell the story.

When I was about fourteen, my brother (who is 1 ½ years younger than I am) and I got together with two other boys on our street who were the same ages as we were. We decided that we were going to steal some lemons from lemon trees in the back yard of a neighbor who lived further down our street.

The lemon trees were in the back yard behind a large wall. What made the theft tense for us was that the neighbors also had a large, vicious German Shepherd who sometimes made sudden appearances in the back yard.

My brother was the one who was chosen to go over the wall and steal the lemons. He stole several dozen lemons, all the while nervously looking out for the German Shepherd. Finally, we decided that we had stolen enough lemons. My brother hopped over the wall to safety—much to his relief!

Then, we went around the neighborhood and sold the lemons to as many neighbors as would buy the lemons.

Eventually, it was time to go home. We still had about 10 or 12 lemons left.

When we arrived home, much to our shock, my Dad knew about the lemons. Furthermore, we were astonished to see a police car parked in front of the neighbor's house from which we had stolen the lemons. We were paralyzed with fear. To this day I do not know how my Dad found out about the lemons.

Nevertheless, my Dad, who had grown up in Austria, said that there was an unwritten rule in Austria that one only took what one could eat from a neighbor's tree. Whereupon he ordered us to eat all the lemons we had left!

Now, I am not sure why Jon likes that story. Perhaps it is because I had to eat about 5 or 6 sour lemons at one sitting. Or perhaps it is because *I* was caught stealing.

But I want you to know that the heart of the thief that lived in me as a 14-year old boy still lives in me today. And, it lives in you too. **“You who preach against stealing, do you steal?”**

The idea that one should not steal is a generally accepted

standard of human behavior, but it is just as generally broken. You should not think that you have kept this commandment just because you have not forced your way into another person's home and walked off with his possessions.

You steal from God when you fail to worship him as you ought. You steal from God when you set your own concerns ahead of his. You steal from an employer when you do not give the best work of which you are capable. You steal from an employer when you overextend your coffee breaks or leave work early. You steal if you waste company products or use company time for personal matters. You steal if you sell something for more than it is worth. You steal from your employees if the work environment for which you are responsible harms their health. You steal if you do not pay employees enough to guarantee a healthy, adequate standard of living. You steal when you borrow something and do not return it. And you steal from yourself when you waste your talents, time, or treasures.

After citing the eighth commandment, Paul moves backward to the seventh and asks: **“You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?”** (2:22).

How do you answer this question, particularly when adultery, fornication, and a variety of forms of sexual experimentation are not excused, but even encouraged and applauded? How do you answer this question in view of the revelation of sexual sins in the lives of prominent national figures, both secular *and* religious?

How do you answer this question in view of Jesus' teaching that the seventh commandment has to do with the thoughts of your minds and the intents of your hearts and not *only* with external actions? According to Jesus' teaching, lust is the equivalent of adultery, just as hate is the equivalent of murder, for he said in Matthew 5:27-28: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has *already* committed adultery with her in his heart.”

There is hardly an area of our culture that is so in opposition to God's standards as this one. The media use the lure of sex to

push materialism and glamorize the pursuit of pleasure. Television fills our homes with sex-filled advertisements, and its programs are increasingly explicit in portraying immoral sexual relationships and practices. Movies are worse.

I remember watching a movie some years ago about a woman whose marriage was not great. And then along came another man who was tender and caring and sensitive and attentive—all the things a wife desires from her husband. The movie producers so carefully manipulated my emotions that by the end of the movie I found myself cheering for the woman not to work at her marriage but rather to dump her husband and get together with the other man! And I remember after the movie was over feeling a tension between my mind (knowing that adultery was a violation of the seventh commandment) and my emotions (wanting to support the violation I had just witnessed on the screen).

You and I struggle with this commandment all the time. You should not think that you have kept this commandment because you have not had sexual relationships with a person who is not your spouse. You commit adultery when you look at another person lustfully. You commit adultery when you read pornographic material. You commit adultery when you watch pornographic material, whether it is on TV, the big screen or the internet.

Men, pornography is becoming increasingly pervasive—especially on the internet. Do you watch pornography? If you do, let me encourage you to talk to some mature brother or father in the faith about it. Don't continue to dabble in something that will ruin your relationships with those closest and dearest to you.

The third of Paul's examples is a reference to the first and second commandments: **“You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?”** (2:22).

It is not as easy to understand this question as it is to understand the first two. There are several difficulties here. So far as we know, the Jews did not **rob temples**. Does this mean, then, merely that they robbed God of the honor properly due to him? Does it refer to the trafficking in offerings conducted in the courtyard of the

temple in Jerusalem, which Jesus condemned? Does it refer to Jews possessing (perhaps as art objects) items that had been taken from heathen temples by Gentile armies and later sold? Does it refer to actual temple plunder? It is hard to say what this means, although there are arguments in favor of each of these views.

What we can say is that, regardless of the particular way the ancient Jew may have broken the first and second of the Ten Commandments (which we may or may not understand), we certainly understand how *you and I* have broken them—even the most religious and devout among us.

The first commandment is a demand for your exclusive and zealous worship of the true God: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3).

To worship any god but the God of the Bible—Jehovah—is to break this commandment. But you need not worship a clearly defined “god” to break this commandment. You don’t have to worship Allah or Buddha or Zeus or one of countless modern idols.

You break this commandment whenever you give some person or object or some worldly aspiration the first place in your life—a place that belongs to God alone. Often today the substitute god is yourself or an image of yourself. You break this commandment when you are more concerned about your success than you are about God. You break this commandment when you strive for fame or recognition at the expense of putting God first in your life. You break this commandment when you work instead of worship on the Lord’s Day. (Now I am not talking about those of you are involved in works of necessity and mercy. Those works on the Lord’s Day are permitted.)

To keep this commandment would be, as John Stott says, “to see all things from [God’s] point of view and do nothing without reference to him; to make his will our guide and his glory our goal; to put him first in thought, word and deed; in business and leisure; in friendships and career; in the use of our money, time and talents;

at work and at home.”¹

Now consider the second commandment, which says: “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand *generations* of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exodus 20:3-6).

If the first commandment deals with the *object* of your worship, forbidding the worship of any false God, this second commandment deals with *manner* of your worship, forbidding the worship of the true God unworthily.

This means that you should take the utmost care to discover what God is truly like and thus increasingly worship him as the only great, transcendent, spiritual, and inscrutable God he is. But you and I do not do this. Instead, as Paul argued at the beginning of his discussion, you suppress the knowledge of God and find that your foolish hearts are darkened (Romans 1:18, 21).

When Paul comes to the end of this paragraph, which describes the true state of the orthodox, or “religious,” person, he quotes the Old Testament to show that **“God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you”** (2:24; cf. Isaiah 52:5; Ezekiel 36:22). This is always the case when ostensibly devout people violate the very standards they proclaim. It is a terrible thing!

But there is something even more terrible, and that is that if this is a description of you, that you should continue down this wrong path, supposing that you are on the best of standings with God—just because you are religious—when actually you are, like the pagans around you, on a swift journey to destruction.

Commentator William Barclay begins his discussion of these verses with the words: “To a Jew a passage like this must have

¹ John R. W. Stott, *Basic Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1958), p. 65.

come as a shattering experience.”²

He is right, of course. But it is not only for the Jew that a passage like this is or should be shattering. It should be shattering to you and to me if we find ourselves thinking that our case is somehow different from that of other people—just because of our religious commitments.

Conclusion

If you have been trusting in your obedience to the law of God, if you have been trusting in your baptism, if you have been trusting in your confirmation, if you have been trusting in your attendance at worship, if you have been trusting in your church membership—even your membership here at the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church, if you have been trusting in your knowledge of the Bible, if you have been trusting in your understanding of doctrine—even Reformed doctrine, if you have been trusting in your generous stewardship, if you have been trusting in your Christian upbringing, if you have been trusting in *anything* other than Jesus Christ and his death upon the cross in your place, throw whatever it is you are trusting in completely out of your mind. Abandon it. Stamp upon it. Get rid of it. Throw it out!

Only Jesus perfectly obeyed the law of God. You can *never* do it perfectly. But if you trust alone in the only one who has fully obeyed God’s law—Jesus Christ—you will find full acceptance with God. So, turn to Jesus Christ *alone*, and trust him only.

² William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1969), p. 42.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAAYER:

Almighty God, we struggle so much with the danger of performance. We think that we can gain acceptance with you by performance of religious duties. Help us to see that our performance is always imperfect. Help us to see that we will never be able to obey your law perfectly.

That is why we thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ. Thank you that he obeyed your law perfectly. Thank you that our acceptance with you is based solely on the perfect obedience and righteousness of Jesus your Son, our Savior.

And we pray all of this in his name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.