

Romans 2: 17 - 29

After a week off from the sermon series because of Harvest, we return to that theme of being unashamed of the gospel and examining Paul's letter to the Romans.

Today, we continue where Andrew finished, where he spoke about repentance, where salvation comes from, and warning against heresy.

This morning, we will examine Paul's warning about hypocrisy and his warning about giving non-believers a chance to blaspheme against God because of our actions.

I don't know about you, but I'm finding, as we go deeper into this letter, it's getting more brutal, the language used and the message Paul is conveying. But I won't be putting any cold ice on this.

Paul's aim for creating the letter was a kind of preamble to the Christian community in Rome before he would eventually join them in person, before his continued journey onwards to, as one theologian called it, the 'virgin mission field'¹ of Spain.

The Jews that we hear of in Romans are Jewish Christians. These people had been expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius, but then, five years later, they were allowed to return under Nero but were again persecuted. They would have returned to their house churches that had, until that point, been run by the gentile Christians, and it wasn't necessarily an easy return.

Paul, though, is very tough on these Jewish Christians, and it appears that he expected more of them. And by chapter 2, Paul is starting to ramp up the rhetoric.

But before we go into a deep dive, let us pray: Father, thank you for our continued journey into Paul's letter to the Romans. And although these are tough versus both theologically and descriptively, we pray that you speak to us through these words. And where it challenges us and makes us uncomfortable, shape us into the followers you expect. In the name of your only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

These are challenging verses in Romans, aren't they? They make me feel uncomfortable. And I wonder what you all felt as it was read out?

Did it make you feel uneasy? If that was the case for you, then you're not far off the mark of what Paul was trying to achieve. Paul begins by going on the attack. He is warning those Christians who identify as Jews about being complacent at being right with God. He is asking them to look at the inner circumcision of the heart, rather than the outward. Meaning we must allow God to cut away all the things that is getting in the way of us having a genuine, authentic relations with God himself.

Now it seems that Paul had got news about this community, that they somehow thought that because they had been taught the law, they obeyed the law, and were people set apart for God - that they were some special people that no longer needed to work on their obedience to God.

And Paul was telling them to "catch themselves on". It was as though they had gone rogue - and were misunderstanding the whole point of the gospel message.

Paul then appears to turn his attention to those in the community who teach - it says in Romans 2:21-24...

The word blaspheme here comes from the Greek word blaspheméō - the 'blas' (blax), means slow, and 'pheme' means reputation². So, it means slow to acknowledge or slow to show respect to God. Paul isn't warning about our behaviour, making people take the Lord's name in vain. But warning that our hypocritical behaviour could prevent others from coming to God. And if we think of it like that, it is horrendous.

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/why-paul-wrote-romans-putting-the-pieces-together/>

² <https://biblehub.com/greek/987.htm>

Let's not have God's name blasphemed because of us. Our actions, how we talk to people, and how we behave because the world is studying us. We are being watched - this is not some conspiracy theory where some vague social media post tries to stir up a frenzy.

The world, those who despise Christianity, are waiting to show us our faults - the church's faults. Because the church doesn't always, and hasn't always, practised what it preaches - why? Because the church hasn't always lived with integrity, it has at times, and a lot of times, to be honest, has been hypocritical.

Rather than attracting followers to Christ, it has pushed people further away from God. The great commission has sometimes been turned on its head to the great commiseration. And I'm sure that pains us all to hear.

This can be seen as the 'practice what you preach' section within Romans. This terminology has been harnessed by atheists and weaponised against Christianity, especially aimed at the church's leaders.

But then, who can blame them? Especially when we look back at what the church has done. And what I mean by the church - I mean the global church. I was in a lecture with Bishop Fanta Clarke³ a few months back, and he said that the global church really needs to get down on its knees and say sorry for the many things it has got very wrong. And that can start with us.

The church has not always practised what it preaches, and it still continues today. How many people are hurting because of what the church and individuals within the church have done to them?

One of the problems with leadership, and particularly church leadership, is having integrity. We have been seeing it across the media. Only this week, we've read in the news that a church here in Northern Ireland has set aside a considerable amount of money to address allegations of historic spiritual and emotional abuse from leadership. I must note that that church has come out with an apology⁴.

The Gospel Coalition wrote this about the effects of church leadership without integrity and the consequences of hypocrisy...

"It is a wrecking ball, smashing souls in its path, leaving disoriented saints staggering through the rubble of betrayal. Counterfeit shepherds create callous sheep. In response, some deconstruct their way to deconversion, calling it quits with Christianity. For those who stick around, determined to find healing in the church rather than outside it, anger, distrust, and self-doubt linger⁵."

It paints a rather desolate and uncomfortable picture.

We need more integrity with our church leaders - Psalm 78:72 says...

Integrity 'demonstrates who we are in Christ'⁶. It shows the world that we are set apart and that our faith is genuine. We need to demonstrate truthfulness and honesty.

Integrity starts with believing what the Bible says and not transforming it to suit the needs of a philosophy, aligning with a political belief, or appeasing a group of people.

Integrity starts with not being ashamed of the message of the Gospel and ignoring the most challenging passages or those that don't make sense. But at the same time, applying the Good News not just to our outward demeanour to the person on the street but also within that private life when it's just us and God.

³ Filling Station (Need month)

⁴ <https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/vineyard-church-sets-aside-30k-to-address-substantiated-spiritual-abuse-claims-against-alan-scott>

⁵ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/confront-hypocrites-dont-cancel/?amp>

⁶ <http://www.churchleadership.org/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=42531>

It can be too easy to hide behind scripture such as Romans 3:23: 'for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God'⁷ - as though it is a place of sanctuary where we can not be hurt, and we can't hurt others.

That place where we can shrug our shoulders and say, "I'm a sinner. What will you expect?" because that doesn't pass it. Yes, we acknowledge our sinful nature and that is so correct, but not to approach God and ask to be shaped by Him, to change our nature - then we have problems.

If we say in our hearts and with our tongues that we believe in Jesus Christ, then we are on a direction of travel that requires constantly checking our spiritual compass, ensuring we are on track and not deviating from it. And those constant deviations lead us away from God; those deviations are a path away from Jesus. Those deviations are what we call sin.

Just before I started my studies, I was bought an excellent book by Ian Cowley on struggle. Ian, an Anglican priest, says this...

"What we...know... is that sin, greed and selfishness lead to the spoiling and discretion of God's good purpose. What God has made to be good, rich, and beautiful has become tarnished, broken and depleted"⁸.

But, "What matters is not the finished article but the direction of travel."⁹

Paul writes, "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you'. He was talking to the Church in Rome but also speaking directly to us. Does our behaviour make people blaspheme God's name?

1. THE CHALLENGE HAS BEEN SET

So Paul has set the challenge for us all.

Hypocrisy is the alternative narrative to integrity. In today's reading, Paul is challenging us to be upstanding followers of Christ, where we practice what we preach, practice what we believe because those who do not believe, as Paul warns us, will condemn - and if they condemn, we are pretty much handing over the keys for them to drive further away from Christ - and how dare we do that!

How dare the people of God, who have been asked to make disciples of all nations, drive a wedge between them and God our Father. Our sin is standing in the way of souls being saved.

Remember what Jonny said a few weeks ago - that if we had been cured of a disease, we would tell the world. We have the death cure, and we are expected to share it with others. But when we are hypocritical, we destroy that message, the message of Jesus Christ and His Good News.

Let's not have God's name blasphemed because of us and what we say and do.

2. NEEDING GOD

I'm standing here today as a leader in training, knowing that people will look to me for integrity. I am under no illusion that living a Christian life with integrity is easy for anyone. I break the law of Moses. But I will not stand behind the wall of the excuse that I am a sinner. What do you expect? Because that ignores my, our, relationship with Jesus, it ignores what a great God we have who is our help and ultimately our salvation.

Sin is an uphill battle; it's like climbing a mountain - but that wonderful Psalm puts it beautifully, more elegantly than I could ever conjure (Psalm 121)...

Focusing our eyes on Christ helps us. When we keep relying on Him for His help, it becomes easier. In Romans 9, God is classed as the great Potter. I am merely a lump of clay. But each time I come to Him for

⁷ Romans 3:23

⁸ The Contemplative Struggle, Ian Cowley, p88

⁹ The Contemplative Struggle, Ian Cowley, p76

help, he moulds me. He is removing the sharp edges and smoothing out the blemishes, and trust me, there are lots - ask Joy.

And that is what He does to us all, all those who come to Him - He works through us, fashioning us into the cup, that becomes the vessels of God. And without Christ, we can do nothing.

One of my Theological heroes is J.C Ryle, the first Bishop of Liverpool. I can't entirely agree with everything he once said - but this from his book on Holiness is very special...

“Holiness comes from Christ. It is the result of a vital union with Him. It is the fruit of being a living branch of the True Vine. Go then to Christ and say, “Lord, not only save me from the guilt of sin, but send the Spirit, who you did promise, and save me from its power. Make me holy. Teach me to do your will”¹⁰.

We have a helper in the Holy Spirit. It sounds like doom and gloom, but we must remember that God is for us.

3. WARFARE

And we must fight the good fight because, as J.C Ryle also said, “True Christianity is a fight”¹¹. It's warfare on a spiritual level.

We are fighting against spiritual forces and the forces of natural yearnings...

Using Paul's analogies, we are fighting against the forces of sexual desires - adultery.

We are fighting against greed and wanting something, not ours - stealing.

We are fighting against worshipping something other than God - taking on idols.

We are fighting against our boastfulness, of being proud and simultaneously breaking the law of Moses - Hypocrisy.

Let's not have God's name blasphemed because of us. We need to live authentic lives. How do we do that? Paul has the answer - this time in Ephesians 5:1-2...

4. WHAT DO WE TAKE AWAY?

And that is the takeaway this morning. We need to live authentic lives. Our hearts need to be circumcised - our hearts need to be changed by the Spirit, not by the law. It means living our lives with God at the helm. It means being open to God, getting down on our knees and repenting.

It means that our outward appearance stands for nothing if our heart is not remodeled. We must avoid being like the Pharisees, who were engrossed in their religiosity. What do I mean...

- As right as it is, coming to church does not mean our hearts are circumcised.
- As right as it is, saying we read the bible does not mean our hearts are circumcised.
- As right as it is, placing money in the giving plate does not mean our hearts are circumcised.
- As right as it is, serving in a church ministry does not mean our hearts are circumcised.
- And as right as it is, training to be a church leader does not mean our hearts are circumcised, nor is preaching from the front.

Our hearts are only circumcised when we allow God to cut away the worldly things. This and only this, will enable us to concentrate on the Spiritual stuff.

¹⁰ Holiness Page 39

¹¹ Holiness Page 40

And if you are here this morning thinking, I need help with that, we would love to pray for you.

Paul is telling the church that it is not enough to merely know the law or rituals of the church but about living them out sincerely and from within our hearts.

At the end of our passage, Paul encourages us to look at our internal transformation, the circumcision of the heart, over our outward transformation that can lead to hypocrisy.

It emphasizes that none of these matter when our hearts are not in the right place - we need everything to be stripped away. So that we can simply come to God, and that is when we authentically return to the heart of worship.

Amen.