

# The Problem of Religion

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[ 0 : 00 ] And verses 17 to 29, which is on page 116, 1129, sorry, 1129, if you've got a church Bible, Romans chapter 2, verse 17 to 29.

And before we look at that, we are going to pray. So let's do that together. Amen. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at.

Man looks at the outward appearance. But the Lord looks at the heart. Father, our prayer is that right now, you would look into our hearts.

And you would show us exactly what we are like. And that this morning you would show us how you are going to change us.

How you can transform us. And so we pray that by the power of your Holy Spirit, you would speak into our lives.

[ 1 : 29 ] May none of us not miss any word. But may we hear you through your word, speaking into our lives.

changing us, changing us to be more like Jesus. May we never be content with the way we are. But may you go on making us more like you. Amen. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Well, imagine for a moment that you have entered the new X Factor show. I know you all secretly watch it. And I know you all love to perform on stage.

Well, if you were in the X Factor show, very soon you would discover that if your performance is not up to scratch, you would not get through to the next round. If you don't tick all the boxes, good voice, good looks, good style, I think I've got all of them.

[ 2 : 33 ] But I haven't got good rhythm. It's going to be a simple fail. The buzzer will sound and you will exit the stage. Or suppose you've entered The Apprentice.

If you show good management skills, good leadership, good selling technique, good initiative, then you will be rewarded with a place in the multi-million company of Alan Sugar.

And you will watch as those who didn't perform get fired. You see, our culture and our society that we're in condition us into believing that if you perform well, you will get rewarded.

If you look good, if you're successful, you're going to go places. But if you don't perform, then you won't get rewarded.

You'll be looked down on. Now, religion, I want to suggest this morning, is no different. Religion is all outward performance.

[ 3 : 38 ] It's all a show. And we meet some very religious people in Romans chapter 2. We looked at the first part last week. And this week we follow in from verse 17.

And in chapter 2, we meet people who love their Bibles. People who love going to church. Similar to an awful lot of people that are here this morning.

Now, before we meet these people in detail, let's remind ourselves of the situation that we are in.

Back in chapter 1, verse 18, we read there that the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven.

Why? Well, it's against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness. Literally, they push it out.

They live as if God does not exist. Pretend that he's not there. And so God is rightly angry at the road rage incident that we heard about in Dublin this past week.

[ 4 : 51 ] But he is also angry at the hurtful words that we speak to our spouse or to our friends. So how is God going to respond to this?

Well, look at chapter 2, verse 6. God says that he will give to each person according to what they have done. Verse 16 of chapter 2.

This will take place on the day when God will judge everyone's secrets. Nothing will be off limits.

There will be nowhere to hide. God will judge everyone's secrets through Jesus Christ as my gospel declares. So the hard truth that we're faced with in these first couple of chapters of Romans is that we are all under God's fair judgment and deserving of his wrath.

Now that's very hard. And the question we need to ask is, is there any way we can escape it or avoid it?

[ 6 : 00 ] Well, there's a very common belief that religion will somehow save you and protect you. The religious people say something like this.

If I keep God's law, if I know my Bible really well, then God is going to save me from his judgment. Or somebody else might say, well, if I follow my church's tradition, it's going to protect me from God's wrath.

Well, look at the answer that we get in chapter 2, verse 28. We're going to come to this in a little minute, but let's just read verse 28.

I'm going to paraphrase it for you. Verse 29.

No, a person is a Christian if he is one inwardly. Now that sums up the difference between the gospel and religion.

[ 7 : 07 ] The gospel is all concerned with inward heart change, about changing us on the inside. While religion is all about outward style performance, what other people think of me.

And as we will see, religion can't protect you or save you. It will only destroy you and break you. Which leads us to one conclusion that we all need the gospel to change us on the inside.

To do that work that no one else can do. Well, let's meet some of these religious people that we have in chapter 2.

In verses 17 to 24, we are introduced to, we're going to call him Mr. Law. He's a very proud man. Because in verse 17, we're told that he relies on the law and he writes about his relationship with God.

So Mr. Law is really saying, look guys, I'm accepted by God because I know all about the Bible. I rely on the law.

[ 8 : 23 ] Well, let's look at his life in more detail. There's three things we know about him. First, he's somebody who's been instructed by the Bible. Look at verse 18. If you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law.

So here's somebody who goes to church every week. He reads his Bible regularly and he even downloads sermons off the internet. He knows what God's will is because he spends his time reading upon it.

And he knows what a superior way of living is because he studied it. Mr. Law is no fool. He's very intelligent. He's a very clever person.

In fact, he's more than being instructed by the Bible. He is an instructor of the Bible. Look at verse 19. If you're convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth.

So he's not just a learner. He's a teacher. He loves nothing more than to sit down with a group of people and to teach them all about what the Bible has to say.

[ 9 : 44 ] He can't wait for Sunday mornings when he can stand in the pulpit and tell people how they should live. Mr. Law is very sharp.

He'll pick up on anything that is not right because he knows all about it. However, surprisingly, Mr. Law is incapable of obeying the Bible.

There's a question that is posed to him in verse 21. He says, Mr. Law is looking at a tea break when the boss wasn't looking.

Ever downloaded songs or films without adhering to copyright rules? Stealing. Ever collected the dole and done a little bit of extra work without declaring it?

Stealing. Mr. Law is looking somewhat embarrassed. And yet there's more for him. Verse 22. Verse 22. You who say that people should not commit adultery.

[ 11 : 14 ] Do you commit adultery? Well, I only have one wife and I've never even entertained the thought of having an affair. Okay.

But have you ever looked at another woman lustfully? And allowed your mind to imagine? Mr. Law puts his head down.

He's become very, very silent. And yet there's more. Verse 22. You who abhor idols. Do you rob temples?

Well, no. I don't have any idols or images in my homes. And I would certainly not rob them from any other temple. Because the first and second commandment says that we should never do that.

Okay.

Okay. But don't you have God's substitutes in your life? Aren't there people and things that you put in place of God? Don't you take all of this wonderful creation and all the good gifts that God has given you?

[12:18] Don't you enjoy it and take pleasure in it? But yet you ignore your creator? Don't you enjoy it and take pleasure in your life?

Because of you. Now, for the religious Jew who was listening to this, that was quite a slap in the face. Because verse 24 is a direct quote from Isaiah where God reminds his people that they were taken off into exile because they had continually disobeyed.

All the other nations looked in on the nation of Israel. And they saw their behavior and what they were doing. And they were all thinking, what kind of God of you?

You just do whatever you like. And when God saw that happening, he says, I'm not putting up with it any longer. You're going to go into exile. And it's no different for those who say, I read the Bible, I love the Bible.

But as they walk about town and as they go to work, they ignore it in their lifestyle. Mr. Law, when people look at your life, they don't see a holy man.

[13:55] They see a hypocrite. Now, one day, we're all going to face God's judgment. And we're all going to have to answer for our lives.

And what on earth are we going to say? If we include any of these following things or anything similar, we're in deep trouble. If we're to say to God, I went to Sunday school.

I learned my memory verses. And I even did my Bible readings at night. I taught at Crusaders, you know. And I even led a quiet time at camp.

I attended church quite often. Always paid attention to the sermons. And I was always taking notes. Now, they're all good things by themselves.

But they are absolutely useless before God. They cannot save you. Suppose you're coming down Cars Hill.

[15:00] And you're stopped for speeding. The guard comes along and he knocks on your window and he says, Excuse me, you are doing 100 kilometres an hour in an 80 kilometre zone.

I'm going to have to find you. Oh, it's alright. I know what the zone is. In fact, I know what all the speed limits are in Carrigaline. I'm sorry, you're fined.

But I have the highway code. I even have my very own copy. I'm sorry, you're fined. But don't you realise that I actually teach people?

I'm teaching my own son how to drive right now. Now, to think that your knowledge or awareness of the rules of the road would somehow get you off the fine is nothing but ridiculous, isn't it?

But that's how many people are going to face God's judgement. They think that somehow their knowledge of their Bible, their ability to teach it, their love for it, their devotion to it, is somehow going to save them.

[16:10] It's absolute rubbish. It can never save you because we can never put into practice everything that it tells us to do. So Mr. Law, or Mrs. Law, are in serious trouble.

Now, in verses 25 to 27, we're introduced to another religious person. We'll call him Mr. Tradition. He's related to Mr. Law. And Mr. Tradition is very proud because, if you look in verses 25 to 27, it's all about circumcision. And he's very proud because he has been circumcised.

And boastfully, he tells all his friends, I'm accepted by God. God loves me because I follow the tradition of my church. You see, circumcision for the Jew was this outward sign.

It was a mark physically on your life that you are part of God's people. And it was treated a little bit like a passport into heaven. And so the Jew thought that if you had this sign, if you had this mark, you were accepted.

[17:24] In fact, his tradition even taught him that no person who was circumcised would go to the place of death. They believed that Abraham, their great father of the past, actually sat at the entrance of hell and stopped every circumcised Jew from going there.

So it was most important that you were circumcised. Now, we don't follow the tradition, I don't think, of circumcision. But we've all got our own traditions, haven't we?

Ireland is a very religious country and whatever church background you come from, you're full of tradition. We can't escape it. We love our membership and our baptism.

We adore communions and confirmations. And somehow we believe that if I'm baptised or if I'm confirmed, I'm going to be accepted.

And we treat it like our passport into heaven. You don't believe me? Well, the next time you go to a funeral, and I was at one recently, listen to what the pastor or the priest might say.

[ 18 : 36 ] Let's say something like this. Because they were baptised or marked with the sign of the cross, they're going to be in heaven. But it's all superstition.

And Paul has something to say to Mr. Tradition, verse 25. He says, circumcision, baptism if you like, it has value if you obey the Bible.

But if you break or don't do what the Bible says, you have become as though you had never been circumcised or baptised.

You see, what Mr. Tradition has forgotten is that circumcision is only an outward physical sign, just like baptism and confirmation are. It has no power.

It's not some mystical charm that's going to protect you from God's judgement. The real or true sign that you are part of God's family, that you are accepted by God, is a heart that is changed and a heart that wants to obey God's word.

[ 19 : 49 ] That's how you know who the true people of God are. Look at verse 26. If those who are not baptised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were baptised?

You see, tradition looks great on the outside. It even provides us with a sense of security and assurance.

But it's all false. It's all empty. It's empty because you're still the same person. You've never changed. Now we love getting together for a confirmation.

We love getting together for a baptism. We love all of these things and we invite all our friends and all our families and uncles and aunts and everybody comes together and we all have a great big party and we think it's all wonderful.

The child or the person is now okay. And they can go and live and do whatever they like. It's absolute nonsense because they're exactly the same person as they were before the event.

[ 20 : 58 ] The people that God accepts are those whose lives have been changed on the inside out.

And sadly, many people put their hope in tradition. And when their loved one passes away, they dig deep for some kind of comfort and they remind themselves, well, it's okay.

Granny was christened in this church. She'll be alright. She's in heaven now. Don't worry, Grandad was baptised.

He's in heaven too. Baptised and buried in the same church. Imagine. He's alright. How's that? It's all superstition.

Imagine the scene. It's judgment day. And Mr. Tradition arrives feeling very proud with his church credentials. He has a list of all of his achievements.

[ 22 : 05 ] Baptised in 1971. First communion in 78. It was a beautiful summer that year. Confirmed when he was a teenager.

Became involved in his local church. was on the parish team. The list goes on and on and on. And besides him stands an old friend who never went to church.

Never even got baptised. Never even had communion. He doesn't have a list to bring with him. But his life speaks for himself.

His life is his written record. Because he was obedient. He did what God's word said. And not a word is said between Mr. Tradition and his friend.

But very slowly it all begins to dawn on Mr. Tradition. His piece of paper counts for nothing. He stands judged and condemned by the person he thought was lost.

[ 23 : 15 ] Look at verse 27. the one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who even though you have the written code even though you know all about the Bible even though you've been baptised and confirmed you're just a lawbreaker.

So if Bible knowledge can't save you and if church tradition can't protect you what on earth is going to protect us and save us from God's wrath and God's judgement?

It's most important that we've got that right. Well look at verse 28. A man is not a Jew if he is one outwardly nor is circumcision merely outward and physical.

He's saying there that the real Jew the true Jew is not known by the external but by the internal. In other words the true Christian is the one who tries to keep is not the one who tries to keep all the laws and who follows all the traditions.

The true Christian is the person who has been changed on the inside. Now there's two things here we want to look at. First it's all about the internal not the external.

[ 24 : 52 ] Look at verse 29. Now a person is a Jew he is a Christian if he is one inwardly and circumcision is circumcision of the heart.

We don't want to think about circumcision too long that's a bit painful isn't it? It involved cutting away the skin it was an external sign. But the gospel says what we really need is a cutting away of the heart.

Suppose I was to go to my doctor following a recent check up and as I wait in the surgery I'm presented with this news from the doctor. She comes out and she says Johnny I have the results and we see that you've got some heart disease there's some speckles on your heart you've got disease there and if you want to live we need to operate we need to get in there and cut away the infection and if you don't you're going to die we need to treat it.

I look at the doctor as if she's got two heads. Don't be so silly I'm actually quite fine I've walked here I'm alright I just ran a marathon there's nothing wrong with me.

Well I think we all know that the external signs count for nothing. We need to deal with the internal and it's the same with our own hearts and our own lives.

[ 26 : 26 ] the centre of our lives the core of our being need operated on. We need to cut away the rotten disease of sin which religion can never deal with.

And how's that going to happen? Well it's all about the spiritual and not the physical. Look at the rest of verse 29. It says circumcision of the heart by the spirit not the written code.

By the spirit not by religion. Now suppose with that news from the doctor I go home and I go into the kitchen and I take out the sharpest knife in the drawer and I take off my shirt and I begin to make an incision into my heart.

and just as I am about to cut into my heart Kirstie rushes in. She doesn't push it don't worry. She says what are you doing? Well the doctor said that I've got heart disease and I need to cut it out. Now that would be absolutely stupid wouldn't it on our part. We'd kill ourselves. We need the surgeon to do it. The expert the one who knows.

[ 27 : 48 ] and anything else and we'll be as good as dead. Now see what it says here in verse 29 that this work the circumcision the cutting away of the heart is done by the spirit not by religion.

In other words God by his Holy Spirit must dig deep into our hearts. He's the only one who can change us and transform us. He's the one who sees us exactly what we're like.

We can put on that great appearance on the outside. We can walk in here this morning. We can look beautiful. We can go to work tomorrow and nobody knows what's inside.

But God sees and he knows the change that needs to go on. And look what happens when the spirit goes to work in our lives.

Have a look at Romans chapter 8 verses 6 to 9. because that theme of the spirit working in our lives is picked up in chapter 8. Chapter 8 verse 6.

[ 29 : 07 ] It talks about here the sinful man. we can think of that as being the religious person. Chapter 8 verse 6. The mind of the sinful man is death.

But the mind controlled by the spirit is life and peace. The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law nor can it do so.

It doesn't want anything to do with God's word. Those controlled by the sinful nature they cannot please God. You however are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the spirit if the spirit of God lives in you.

And if anyone who does not have the spirit of Christ he does not belong to Christ. You see we do have to come clean before God.

We need to ask that he would come into our lives by the power of his spirit. Change us. And that gift is available to us now through Jesus Christ.

[ 30 : 18 ] He died for all of our sin. He took the judgment that we deserve. He paid the price. And if we trust him he enters into our life and he will change us so that we want to obey God's word.

That we will love him. That we will want to meet with one another in community as an expression as our response to everything that God has done for us.

So when we come to church it's not because we want to put on a performance. We want to come to give thanks to encourage one another to help each other.

And when we open up our Bibles and read it it's not just for head knowledge. It's because we want God to change us to make us more like him. Back in Romans chapter 2 the very last line of that section in chapter 9 says such a man's praise is not from men but from God.

Now that's the test to see whether we are living a gospel life or a religious life. If we're always looking for praise from other people if we're always wanting to be noted by other people as people who do well people who read their Bibles oh aren't they good they always go to church.

[ 31 : 45 ] If we're looking for praise from men we're in serious danger. but if we are people of the gospel then God will look at us and our praise will come from God because we are saying we want you to change us.

Any effort on our part keeping any law or any traditions is going to leave me in danger of God's judgment. What we need is inward heart change not outward styled performance.

let's pray. Our Father God we ask that you would go on changing us.

We pray that your Holy Spirit would enter deep into our lives. Show us the things that we need to get right trusting that in your goodness and in your kindness you will make us more like you.

Thank you that you are a kind God that you deal with us gently that you are patient with us that you are kind towards us that you are forgiving that you do not treat us as our sins deserve and we pray that you would do that work in us today in Jesus name Amen Amen A Amen to happy good happy people whole over