

# The Heart of the Gospel

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A reading from the letter of Paul to the Romans. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.

For in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, the righteous will live by faith.

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness. Now you, if you call yourself a Jew, if you rely on the law and boast in God, if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law, if you are 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 the little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself?

[ 1 : 35 ] You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written, God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you. Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you have not been circumcised.

So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you, you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.

A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the spirit, not by the written code.

Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Thank you, Denise, for that scripture reading, and good morning, Christ Church.

[ 2 : 51 ] Welcome. We're so glad that you're worshiping with us. My name's Andrew, one of the pastors here, and we're looking forward to continuing our series through this book of Romans. You know, it's been 17 years, and this is our first time going through this book, so it's been quite a ride, and we look forward to keep going.

Right, Jonathan? That's right. Will you pray with me before we get into the text? Father, on this Pentecost Sunday, we marvel at the incredibly unique reality that your divine spirit fell on people from all over the place, every kind of person.

And we thank you for that truth, God, that the gospel is for everybody, that there is good news for the nations, and that you are not a respecter of persons, but you desire those who will come to you simply by faith.

We pray that we'd be those kinds of people, that we might know the righteousness of God in Christ and celebrate that glorious gospel truth, that the righteous will live by faith, the power of God unto salvation.

Make that ring powerfully, I pray, this morning in the preaching of your word as we receive the sacraments and the fellowship that's had here. Would you do that, God, by the power of your spirit, in Jesus' name, amen.

[ 4 : 17 ]     Amen. You know, I have these moments in my life where I just kind of roll back the tape and I just replay these really regrettable moments in my head.

And one of them I've shared here before. It's a time when I was in high school. Maybe some of you remember that story where I, like, cheerfully, smugly yelled at a group of other students that they were all going to hell.

And I, like, I remember it like it was yesterday. My buddies and I, you know, we were kids who went to a private Christian school and we were running past this other school that, you know, didn't share the same religious tradition as we did.

And the students of that school, they began to jeer at us and I yelled back, you're all going to hell. And I yelled it with, like, a smile on my face and an air of superiority and self-satisfaction.

And, you know, as I've kind of rolled back the tape on that moment again and again, and I remember this every single week, you know, I've tried to understand how I could utter such, like, hateful words.

[ 5 : 39 ]     And I think it had to do with this tribalistic, self-righteous understanding of my religion, of my Christian faith.

Like, in my mind, I was on the right religious team, the winning team, and those other students, they weren't. Because they didn't go to my private Christian school.

And that's what made me better than them. Me and my team, we believed the Bible. Me and my team, we worshipped the true and living God. And so, therefore, me and my team were superior.

And everyone else deserved hell for not being on my winning team. In my simplistic mind, I was saved, not primarily by the grace of God through faith in Christ, but because I belonged to the right team.

All because I'd grown up on the winning team, the Christian team. And it was everybody else then. Everybody else that needed to be saved, but not me.

[ 6 : 39 ]     Because my status before God was fine because I identified as a Christian. I identified with the right religion. And that was a huge part of my meager understanding of what it meant to be a Christian, to have the truth about God and thus to be religiously superior.

And now you wonder why so many people loathe Christians, right? For being so combative, so arrogant, so self-righteous. It's because of people like me, if I'm honest.

It's crazy to me that I'm up here preaching the gospel. It's because of people like me. This understanding of religion or of Christianity in which there are good guys on the winning team bound for heaven and bad guys on the losing team bound for hell.

And for the rest of my life, I will be repenting of these shameful words that came from my lips. And I thank God every day that his grace is greater than my sin.

Now I do believe though that there is a right religion and that there are many wrong religions. And that you do have, and that there is an insideness to the kingdom of God and you can also be outside of the kingdom of God.

[ 7 : 50 ]     Yeah, sure. I do believe that that's what Jesus and all the scriptures teach. But does simply affiliating with the right religious group automatically secure someone inside the kingdom of God and make them superior?

No. Not at all. See, I share this shameful story from my life to demonstrate how even when we are in possession of God's truth, if God's truth does not actually possess us, all we'll ever do is weaponize God's truth for our own evil supremacist ends.

Like man, I was in high school. I believed in the gospel as a high schooler that Jesus died for my sins, that I was a sinner who needed to be saved by God's grace totally apart from any merits of my own and yet my sinful heart was so twisted that I weaponized God's beautiful message of mercy and grace and I turned it into something that allowed me to condemn and disparage others who did not belong to the tribal religious in-group that I called Christianity.

And honestly, maybe that's why some of you in this room, whether you're a Christian or not, honestly kind of hate Christians. And I don't blame you. I hate myself too.

I hate what I said 20 years ago. And you'd be right to reject this kind of divisive, combative, self-righteous religiosity that calls itself Christianity.

[ 9 : 17 ]     Listen, if you're here today, maybe you're exploring the Christian faith, but you're not sure if you want to identify with Christians like me. Or maybe you're in a season of deconstructing your Christian faith and you're tired of just all the toxic division and all the hypocrisy in the church because of people like me.

Will you please hear me when I say you're absolutely right to be disappointed in the church, to be disappointed in Christians? You're absolutely right to be skeptical.

But please also hear me say that while Christians and the church will surely disappoint you, Jesus will never disappoint you. And maybe you're thinking, well, that's a crummy religion, right?

Like a religion that admits it's full of flawed followers, but I'm here to tell you that that's exactly the point. That's exactly the point. There's actually nothing more humbling, equalizing, unifying, and reconciling than the Christian faith.

Precisely, precisely because it admits that we are all sinners in need of one common Savior, the Lord Jesus. And this is what makes Paul's letter to the Romans so unique and also so relevant for us in our present age of like outrage and polarization and disunity, right?

[ 10 : 35 ]     So as we come to Paul's letter to Rome, let me remind you what Paul's doing here. Paul is writing to a church at the center of, at the center stage of world history, right? Right in Rome, a cosmopolitan church made up of both Jewish and Greco-Roman converts.

Converts that likely have tons of cultural baggage and tons of cultural biases making it hard for them to get along, right? So in this letter, Paul is explaining the gospel and its logic so that his Jewish and Gentile brothers and sisters in Rome will not only embrace one another, but also they'll embrace and support his missionary efforts westward towards Spain amongst people that even Jews and Greco-Roman people would consider as barbaric.

And so we've been following Paul's careful argument about what the gospel is and also what the gospel does and how it changes the way we view those who are other to us.

And Paul's argument is that the good news about Jesus is the power of God unto salvation and not just for a select few, but for everyone, that is every kind of person who simply believes.

Anyone. Good news, not just for the Jewish people, but for the nations and good news, not just for everyone who behaves, but for everyone who believes. Anyone who hopes and trusts in Jesus by faith.

[ 11 : 58 ] For the righteous, he says. Those who are truly righteous in the eyes of God are those who live by faith. Faith in God's righteous and only Son, Jesus Christ.

Now in making this case that everyone can be saved by the power of God through faith, Paul starts by explaining the other side of that coin, which is that everyone needs to be saved by the power of God, particularly from the wrath of God.

Saved from the wrath of God, this righteous wrath that seethes and rages against all our unfaithfulness, all our unrighteousness, all of our idolatry. Judgment is coming, Paul writes.

Justice against all injustice, all the injustice that we've all committed against our God and against his creation, all the ways we've suppressed the truth in our unrighteousness and exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served created things rather than the creator and dishonored our glorious creator and disordered his good creation.

Judgment is coming. And so I want us to imagine this letter being read in these mixed congregations in Rome, right? You have Jewish people in these congregations, you have Greco-Roman people in these congregations, and imagine the Greco-Romans, right?

[ 13 : 12 ] Hearing the gospel, like tearing up, deeply convicted about their past ways of life, right? How they once bowed down to statues of Jupiter and Aphrodite and Apollo and Mars, these gods of thunder and power and art and beauty and war, these created things, these gods that they could never really count on, these gods that never, ever saved them and yet demanded so much of them.

And imagine how good the good news of Paul's gospel must have sounded to them, that they, these former pagan idolaters, even they, could be saved simply by faith in Christ.

But now also imagine the Jewish listeners in this congregation who Paul begins to address in our text today in verse 17. Chapter 2, verse 17. You see, Paul is a Hebrew of Hebrews.

He's a former Pharisee and expert in the law of Moses, and so he can anticipate how the Jewish listeners are going to be receiving what he has to say up to this point in the letter. And what he does is he gets into their shoes and into their state of mind and he articulates back to them their own self-conception, starting in chapter 2, verse 17.

Now if you, now you, if you call yourself a Jew, if you identify with the chosen people of Israel, if you rely on the law of Moses, you know, the Torah, and boast in the one true God, verse 18, if you know his will and approve what is superior, that is, if you know God's ways, if you know right from wrong, verse 19, if you are convinced that you are a guide and that others are blind, that you are a light to others, and others are in the dark, that you are a wise instructor, and others are fools, that you are a teacher, others are infants, and all because you and your people, your tribe, your team, you have the law of Moses, and therefore all this truth and knowledge from God, if you are convinced that you belong to this elite, privileged class of especially righteous people, Paul says, then he flips the script on them in verse 21, you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself?

[ 15 : 15 ] See, Paul anticipates here in verse 17 and following that for every tearfully repentant and convicted Greco-Roman listener to his letter, there might also very well be a Jewish congregant smugly, self-righteously nodding their heads in agreement with every word of Paul's letter up to this point concerning God's wrath and God's justice and his judgment against pagan idolatry and all unrighteousness.

Paul anticipates the judgmental Jewish glances aimed toward their Greco-Roman neighbors in the pews around them because, like, to most Jews, these were filthy Gentiles who came from cultures of pagan religiosity, idol worship, greed, insolence, unstable families, alternative sexual practices, and various other depraved habits that would disgust any Torah-respecting Jew.

So to every Jewish congregant tempted to self-righteously gaze upon their Greco-Roman brothers and sisters in Christ with contempt and with an air of superiority, Paul has a word for them, and it's also a word for us.

Paul asks his Jewish listeners, are you really as faithful? Are you really as righteous as you believe yourselves to be? Have you really taught yourselves?

While preaching against theft, do you ever steal? While preaching against adultery, do you ever commit adultery? While preaching against idolatry, do you ever do anything sacrilegious? And you know what?

[ 16 : 49 ] At least externally, there probably were many Jewish listeners, just like many of us today, who've never really stolen anything, never slept with someone other than our spouse, never robbed any temples.

And the temptation here is to be like, oh, so maybe I am righteous in the eyes of God, saved by my own obedience to the law, but Paul isn't done. And he asks in verse 23, you who boast in the law, all of it, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?

And he's saying, you know, don't even answer whether or not you steal, commit adultery, or rob temples. Have you ever dishonored God by breaking the law? And at this point, every mouth is silenced because honestly, no one, no one can plead innocence.

I mean, even with the sins of stealing, right, and adultery and sacrilegious things, even if we haven't explicitly done any of these things, ultimately the root of every sin is the same. All these sins come from the same place all other sins come from, from a sense of self-interest and superiority and hubris and arrogance and disdain and contempt and just this desire and willingness to treat other people not as people but as things, to look down on them, to use them as if we were God and God was not.

That the rotten fruit might be different but the roots are always the same. And the only difference between us and a thief or an adulterer or a blasphemer or a murderer is often just opportunity, our context, desperation, and maybe just how far down the same wayward path we all are.

[ 18 : 27 ] So Paul says, just as it was for our people who had the law in the olden days of Israel, when the prophet Isaiah indicted our people, the people who received the law of Moses for being terrible representatives of Yahweh among the nations, so also today, verse 24, as it is written, God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.

Because of you, he says to them. He's saying, in case you thought that merely having the law, having the truth would make you special and invulnerable, think again. Not even circumcision, the Jewish sign of belonging to God and his covenant people, not even circumcision, in and of itself, automatically makes you truly right with God.

Now, if you're young in here and you don't know what circumcision is, go ahead and ask your parents. Or if you need a plan B, you can ask Pastor Jonathan and he'll explain that to you.

So I'm not going to do that. But circumcision was this thing that a lot of Jewish people in the first century trusted in for their righteousness, for their safety and security before God.

Just like some people today put more faith in their baptism than in Christ and thus live however they want, thinking, I'm good. I'm good with God just because I got some water on me at some point in my life.

[ 19 : 46 ] In the same way, some of Paul's Jewish readers thought that their circumcision was some kind of magical, protective mark on their bodies that kept them in God's good graces.

There was one ancient rabbi who even taught that Abraham sat at the very entrance of Gehenna and would not let any circumcised person from Israel go down into Gehenna.

But here in verses 25 and following, Paul says, it's not enough to be Jewish on the outside if you aren't circumcised on the inside. Verse 28, A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly nor is circumcision merely outward and physical.

No, a person is a Jew, a person truly belongs to God's people who is one inwardly. And circumcision is circumcision of the heart by the Spirit, not by the written code.

Such a person's praise is not from other people but from God. And you see, what Paul is saying directly to his Jewish listeners and even to those of us who think that we are safe and sound because maybe we have the Bible, we have the truth, we've picked the right religion, we've been baptized, we're members of a church, we go to church on Sundays.

[ 20 : 59 ] What God's Word is saying to all of us is that it's not enough to possess God's truth but God's truth has to possess us. It's not enough to have God's truth but God's truth has to have a hold hold on us, all of us, on our hearts.

Like just because we have the truth doesn't mean the truth will necessarily work itself out in our lives, Paul says. I think about a Peloton, all right? You know, I actually have a friend and he's a little overweight and, well he's a lot overweight and he decided to get an expensive stationary bike and put it in his room to get healthy.

But you know, the last time I was in his room, his bike was not being used. In fact, it was being misused as a laundry rack. And so even though he had the stationary bike, he hadn't allowed the bike to have any of him.

Even though he had this resource to help him lose weight and get healthy, he never worked this helpful life-giving resource into his life. And I wonder how many of us Christians are in this similar situation today.

We feel secure in our relationship with God because maybe one prayer that we prayed when we were in third grade, we feel secure in our relationship with God because we have and know our Bibles and we say we believe them and agree with them even though we don't really open them up, we don't meditate on them, we don't memorize them, we don't study them.

[ 22 : 29 ] Or we find security before God because we know all the right things about God. Oh yeah, I believe he's triune. I believe that Jesus is God and man, that God is omnipotent. I know those words, omniscience, omnipresence, that he's a sovereign creator.

We know all these things about him, but so do the demons and so does Satan. Even though this knowledge mostly just stays in our heads without affecting our hearts and our hands.

We know he's God, but we don't worship and serve him as such. Or maybe we've been baptized, but we don't live like we've been washed clean. We don't live like the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon us.

You see, just as Paul was saying, it's not enough to simply identify as being Jewish or to have or know the law or even to be circumcised.

And the same goes for us. It's not enough to identify as a Christian or to have and know the Bible or to even be baptized. To be a Christian isn't merely to agree with the doctrines of Christianity.

[ 23 : 32 ] To be a Christian is not just to assent to something in your head. No, to truly be a Christian, we must be so cut to the heart by the truth of God that it works itself out in our hands as well.

The God of Christianity, the God of the Scriptures isn't simply after our heads just wanting us to know and believe the right things, you know, intellectually and rationally, and neither is he simply after our hands needing us to serve him and do the right things to earn our righteous status before him or save the world on our own.

No, the God of the Bible is a God who, first and foremost, he's after our hearts. He's after our affections. He wants us to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love others as ourselves just like he has.

He wants to cut out a special, central section in our hearts forever marked as his own. And that's what Paul is getting at in verse 29 when he says, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly and circumcision is circumcision of the heart by the Spirit not by the written code.

Paul is saying it's one thing to be circumcised externally but what matters more is a circumcision of the heart. And by that he means a heart that is tender and set apart and marked off and dedicated to loving and serving God fully, heart, soul, mind, and strength.

[ 25 : 02 ] That's what God deems it says here as most praiseworthy compared to whatever else other people might praise. A circumcised heart is what God praises. Something only the Holy Spirit can do and not the written code of the law.

Now maybe you're here today though and you think to yourself well that's precisely my problem that I can't circumcise my own heart. Like I know that there are some of us here today and maybe you even want this.

Maybe you got it all lined up in your head. You're trying to live this Christian way but there's something that's just not fitting right with your heart. And maybe you want it but you're just not there yet. Your head, your heart, and your hands just aren't all lined up and it's frustrating to you how little control you have over your own heart.

And I want to encourage you to continue drawing near to God as he draws near to you. And I want you to know that even in your frustration, this frustration of yours that you cannot circumcise your own heart, I want you to know that that is the whole point of the gospel.

That God has to do it for you. And that God always comes where he's truly wanted. So I want to encourage you to continue meditating on the gospel. The good news about Jesus is that really circumcision was always really meant to point to in the first place.

[ 26 : 25 ] You see, circumcision, the sign of covenant inclusion, was never meant to be some kind of magical identity badge marking out some people as special or superior in comparison to others without the sign of circumcision.

No, circumcision was always meant to be a picture of something that we could not do for ourselves. Really, circumcision was a sign of the covenant insofar as it was a picture of the seriousness of the covenant that those who violated their covenant relationship with their maker, with Yahweh, deserved to be cut off and torn apart.

And don't you see that this is exactly what happened in Christ? In our place, Christ, the only covenant keeper, the only one who never broke the law, the only one who always, ever, always honored God.

Paul says elsewhere in his letter to Colossae that in Christ, by his death, we were circumcised. Our sin natures put to death and buried with him, nailed to a cross, our debts canceled.

And this, this gospel truth is the only kind of truth that can change our hearts. The truth of God's sacrificial love for us in Christ. In other words, the written code of the law could only ever tell us to obey and to get circumcised.

[ 27 : 44 ] The spirit of the gospel proclaims to us that Christ has obeyed the law in our place and that Christ is our circumcision, the one who bore our covenant curse and was cut off so that we might live, so that we might be forgiven.

And the question for us is, do we just have a hold of this truth in our heads or does this truth have a hold of our hearts and our hands as well? You know, in verse 29, chapter 2, verse 29, chapter 2, it closes with this interesting line about the person whose heart is circumcised by the spirit rather than the written code of the law.

And Paul says that such a person's praise, listen, such a person's praise is not from other people but from who? It's from God. And I think that that is so key to what Paul is trying to accomplish in his letter to the Romans in this mixed congregation of Jewish and Greco-Roman people.

I think it's so key to what he's doing there and what God's doing here through us. What God wants to do by the logic of his gospel. You know, when I yelled at those high schoolers that were, when I told them, you know, you're all going to hell 20 years ago, I was doing so from my tribe, right?

And on behalf of my tribe. And I even remember my two Christian buddies running beside me chuckling at what they understood to be, yeah, maybe brash, but in their minds probably a true statement.

[ 29 : 18 ] And this was all part of our tribal understanding of Christianity. And you know, their chuckles, it made me feel affirmed, right? I felt like I had their praise, I had their affirmation, I had the approval of my tribe.

You know, this is how every single tribal identity works though. Every hostile in-group, out-group dynamic, it's always about seeking the praise of mere mortals from within our tribe, right?

And even when God is often involved in our tribalistic ways, God is made out to be a God in our own image, right? Some parochial God who only serves our interests, right? A God who hates the uncircumcised or who hates those who don't eat kosher or a God who hates those who vote differently than we do.

A God who hates the particular sins of this certain group but tolerates all of our behavior. But Paul says that those who have had their hearts circumcised by the Spirit, hearts made tender by the gospel, this message about the righteous Son of God, sacrificing His life to save the unrighteous, they no longer need, want, or even satisfied by the hollow praises of mere mortals.

but their praise, Paul says, is from God. And man, isn't that not only incredibly liberating to not have to live for the praise of fickle, flawed, and finite human beings anymore but isn't it just altogether better?

[ 30 : 55 ] Like who cares what the peasants think if I have the love and affirmation of the King, right? If I have the adoration of the King, who cares how the world values me or how much praise they give me if the creator of the world praises me for my immaculate righteousness in Christ by faith.

And not only is this liberating and life-giving and the highest possible honor to receive the praise of God because of what Christ has done for us, but don't you see how it also opens up our hearts toward any and everybody no matter how different they are from us?

Like how simultaneously destroys any reason we might have to boast of our own superiority. And yet it doesn't reduce us to a humility that is humiliating and dehumanizing and dishonorable, but rather it maintains for us a noble, confident, secure, and honorable humility in Christ.

See, this is the incredible logic of the gospel that Paul is commending to the church in Rome. In Christ's church, God commends it to us today as well.

The power of God unto salvation, the good news, right? The power of God unto salvation for everyone, every kind of person who believes.

[ 32 : 21 ] And that's the good news of Jesus, that's the good news of Pentecost, and that's the good news that will transform our lives and our city. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.



Will you pray with me? Father, would you forgive our tribalistic instincts, our tribalistic ways, our scarcity mindsets, and all the divisions and barriers that we put up to position ourselves as superior to others?

God, the truth of the matter is that we are insecure because we know we've rebelled against you. We know what's coming to us and we're just trying to get as much as we can before we meet our maker.

But God, you've offered us a better way. You've offered us abundance in Christ. You've offered us not uniformity, but true unity in diversity by your Spirit.

You've leveled the playing field. We're all sinners before you and we can all be saved the same way by grace through faith in Christ. Would you make this a church, oh God, that bears witness to that wonderful reality?

[ 33 : 46 ] Would you make us a church that tears down these barriers in the name of Jesus and with the Spirit, with the power of the Spirit be so evident here as we go forth making disciples of all the nations in the name of Jesus.

Amen.