

(4) Why religion is so dangerous

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[0 : 00] Romans chapter 2, verse 17, on page 1132. But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God and know his will and approve what is excellent because you are instructed from the law, and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself?

While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

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.

For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.

So if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision, but break the law.

[1 : 27] For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the spirit, not by the letter.

His praise is not from man, but from God. Then what advantage has the Jew, or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way, to begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.

What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means. Let God be true, though everyone were a liar, as it is written, that you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged.

But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? I speak in a human way.

By no means. For then, how could God judge the world? But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?

[2 : 39] And why not do evil that good may come? As some people slanderously charge us with saying, their condemnation is just. Chairman, thanks very much indeed for reading for us.

Please, will you keep Romans chapter 3 open on page 1133 as we continue this series of talks in these opening few chapters of Romans that we began a few weeks ago.

Now, we've prayed already, so I shall begin. And I think it's fair to say, isn't it, that there is a world of difference between feeling safe on the one hand and being safe on the other hand.

I just imagine how the passengers on the Titanic must have felt as they set sail from Southampton in April 1912.

They were told it was the safest ship ever to have been built. It was certainly one of the most luxurious ships ever to have been built and one of the fastest as well.

- [3 : 43] Perhaps those in first class feeling rather pleased with themselves and rather satisfied with life. Perhaps those even in third class just thrilled to be part of such a great adventure, many no doubt heading off to New York to begin a new life.

There is a world of difference between feeling safe and actually being safe. And that is true spiritually speaking as well.

You see, where have we got to in Romans so far? Just turn back, will you, to Romans chapter 1, verses 16 and 17, which gives us, if you like, the manifesto for the whole book.

Romans chapter 1, verse 16. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it's the power of salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

For in it, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, the righteous shall live by faith.

- [4 : 54] In other words, says the Apostle Paul, the news about Jesus is a powerful message because those who believe it will be saved. They will be declared right with God on the judgment day.

But of course, we'll only be convinced of that and we'll only see what brilliant news it is once each one of us is convinced that none of us are by nature right with God.

Indeed, that all of us are by nature in the wrong with God. That however safe we feel, we are in grave danger.

Indeed, this whole section, all the way through from chapter 1 verse 18 to chapter 3 verse 19 is heading for the climax of chapter 3 verse 19.

Just have a look at that verse. Chapter 3 verse 19, Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law so that every mouth may be stopped and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

- [6 : 02] You see, perhaps you're here this morning and you have objections when you hear that God is angry with each one of us and that he is right to judge each one of us.

Last week, we thought, didn't we, about those who have objections because they are respectable. Because they can think of other people and they can think, well, at least I'm not as bad as they are. And last week, we saw what God has to say to those who think that he'll be impressed on the judgment day.

And we saw that, no, no one will be good enough for God on the day when our secrets are exposed. But there's still one final group of objectors who need to be silenced.

And that is the religious. And that is what we are looking at today in chapter 2, verse 17, chapter 3, verse 8. And I take it that since all of us are in church today, I take it Paul is speaking to us, the religious.

And you'll see an outline on the back of the service sheets with three points. What is it that God says to us today? The religious.

- [7 : 22] Well, first of all, religious privilege won't save you. Religious privilege won't save you. Verses 17 to 24. Now, in these verses, Paul is focusing on the religious Jew.

Okay? The point being that even them, even they, with the privileges they had, their privileges do not save them. Now, Paul is not anti-Semitic.

He was a Jewish Christian himself. And in Romans, chapter 9 to 11, which we're looking at in our growth groups at the moment, we see his great love for Jewish people. But nonetheless, look at verses 17 and 18, where we see the great privileges that first century Jews had.

Verse 17. But if you call yourself a Jew, rely on the law and boast in God and know his will and approve what is excellence because you are instructed from the law.

And then he goes on. Notice in verse 17, they rely on God's law in the Old Testament. In other words, they trusted it. They boast in God. I think that's meant to be a positive thing.

[8 : 33] Not a kind of inappropriate boasting, but rather rejoicing that they are part of God's people and know God. In verse 18, notice they had the privilege through the Old Testament of knowing God's will and therefore were able to approve what is excellent, to know what is right, to know what is wrong, to know what is important in life, to know what is not important in life.

And then if you look at verses 19 and 20, we see their privileges in terms of the responsibilities which they had to others. a guide to the blind, a light to those in darkness, an instructor of the foolish.

They were meant to be a beacon of light and of truth, echoing God's purposes for his people that through them, the nations will come to God and will come to know God.

But of course, these verses, verses 17 to 20, they don't simply describe first century Jewish religious privileges because Christians are the heirs of these privileges.

These verses, they're a snapshot, aren't they, of us. You see, have a look at them again. Paul could equally well say, indeed he would say to us if he was here today, if you call yourself a Christian, if you know your Bible, if you boast in God and claim to know him, if you approve a sound biblical teaching, if you're convinced, you're a witness to the world and a teacher of the Bible.

[10 : 11] These verses describe many churches. Indeed, they describe many evangelical churches. They describe many conservative evangelical churches in particular.

And here is the punchline. I wonder if you spotted it as Choma read to us, verse 21. You then who teach others, do you not teach yourself?

You don't practice what you preach. Because remember, what did we say last week? What did we see last week as the basis on which God will judge the world? Have a look again chapter 2, verse 6.

God will render to each one according to his works. Judgment is based on the lives we live. Which means, of course, that religious privilege of whatever sort will not save us.

The fact is, you see, that in every church there are people who are real Christians and in every church there are people who think they are real Christians but aren't.

[11 : 28] And look at verses 23 and 24, will you, where we see what happens when those who profess to be real Christians but aren't real Christians at all, what happens when they live their lives. Verse 23, 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. Yes, the outsider is appalled. Frankly, they say, if that is the God you believe in, I do not want to know.

And of course, you only need to think, don't you, of the pedophile scandal in the Roman Catholic Church. The world is appalled. But of course, it's not simply out there, is it?

It is in here. Yeah. Rachel and I went to see the king's speech ten days ago and at one point in the film, King George VI explains to his speech therapist that he has been encouraged to smoke by his doctors.

They thought it would relax his throat muscles and so ease his stammer and enable him to speak more clearly so he could be understood. But of course, tragically, it's his smoking that killed him.

[12 : 53] In fact, I noticed the other day driving along the A23 from Brixton to Kennington just on the left-hand side there's an old advert and it must be from the same kind of era, the 1930s and 1940s, which is etched into the side of one of the buildings there, an advert just kind of in the brickwork so to speak, which is extolling the health benefits of smoking, the tragedy of misplaced confidence.

You see, let me tell you my danger as I look at these verses this morning. My danger is that I assume they apply to other people.

I assume they apply to people in liberal churches, high churches, Roman Catholic churches, but Paul knows perfectly well it is possible to call yourself a conservative evangelical or a charismatic or a Pentecostal and to be a complete hypocrite.

Just as he's saying in these verses here. for your life to be so indistinctive that your friends and your colleagues are frankly appalled by what they see.

You see, there'll be some of us here this morning and frankly, we are just a shell. Perhaps we put our trust in Jesus Christ as a young child or perhaps as a student or perhaps in our early 20s, but life has got busy and therefore the reality of trusting in Christ and his death in our place has simply has simply withered.

[14 : 36] All that is left is a shell. Now, people still think we're Christians because we look the part. We go to a Bible teaching church.

We go to a Bible study perhaps even. We go to the youth group. But I tell you, there are plenty of people in evangelical churches up and down the country like that.

They think their religion will save them. For others, perhaps we've slipped into believing that our Christian service will save us.

We're busy leading Bible studies, busy serving practically. Others assume we're keen Christians because we're so busy. We feel good about ourselves because we're busy and so we assume that God is pleased with us.

But actually, there's no reality. What do you say? What are the telltale signs? How do I know if I'm beginning to think like that?

[15 : 35] Well, verse 19. When I'm so concerned with teaching others and sorting out their lives, that actually, I fail to see the sin in my own life.

or when, verse 20, I come to church or go to a Bible study, actually, it's just about head knowledge. There's no reality. Religious privilege won't save you.

The second thing God wants us to grasp this morning is that religious signs won't save you.

Religious signs won't save you. In verse 25, Paul anticipates an objection. Have a look at verse 25. For circumcision is indeed of value if you obey the law.

But if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. And here's the objection, you see. It's the person who's saying, well, look, we've been circumcised.

[16 : 39] It's the mark of our obedience to God. And again, Paul has the first century Jewish person in view who feels safe because through circumcision they have a special status with God.

And yes, they did. Putt says Paul, don't think of it as a kind of insurance policy. That alone will not save you.

After all, judgment is based on works. And therefore, verse 25, if you break the law, as all of us do, the sign is irrelevant.

While in theory, verse 26, someone who didn't have the sign but nonetheless who did keep the law, well, they'd be alright on the judgment day. Circumcision is not a get-out-of-jail-free card for the first century Jewish person.

Nor are our equivalents. Baptism, either with a little bit of water as a baby or with a lot of water as an adult. It's amazing the number of people who want to have their child done because they see it as a spiritual insurance policy.

[17 : 54] Some Anglican churches, and certainly the Roman Catholic Church, even teaches that when you're baptized, your sin is washed away. But you see, what does Paul say, verse 25?

If then you break the law, which we all do, your baptism then becomes un-baptism. Or if it's not baptism that we trust in, it might be a whole range of other things that we might trust in.

It might be communion or confirmation or be able to tick a particular box of religious affiliation on the census form. Now, imagine for a moment you go away for a couple of days over half term.

You're driving along the motorway. You need a break. You see the big blue motorway service station sign. You think, great, I'll go there, get a cup of coffee, and just put my feet up for a few minutes before I get driving again.

So you go up the slip road and there's nothing there. now what do you do? Was the sign any good?

[19 : 05] No. There is no reality. So you get back in your car, you get back on the motorway again, and a few miles later you see on the hill ahead of you the big McDonald's golden arches ahead of you.

And you think, great, I'll stop there and I'll grab some coffee there. But as you get closer, there's no big blue motorway sign next to the road. Anyway, you think, well, I'll just kind of drive up the slip road and I'll see if it's open, and you go up the slip road and the McDonald's is open, lots of people in there.

Now, would the fact that there was no sign back on the motorway stop you going in to get a cup of coffee? No. The reality is what counts.

And God is saying to us this morning that it's reality that counts in the spiritual world as well. Circumcision, like baptism, was meant to be an outward sign of an inner spiritual reality.

Without the inner reality, the outward sign is useless. that's the point of verse 28. Just have a look at it. Being a real member of God's people is not a matter of something external and physical, but internal and spiritual.

[20 : 31] Religious formality can no more make you a Christian than wearing a ring on the fourth finger of your left hand can make you married. Now imagine for a moment a new Christian in the church in Rome who's not from a Jewish background.

He's just finished a Christianity explore course, he's just put his trust in Jesus Christ, he is keen, he is serving, he is delighting in Jesus and thrilled to be a Christian.

Frankly, he is pretty clueless about the Old Testament and he hasn't even heard of the Bible overview course they run in his church. Now it would be very easy wouldn't it for the Christian from a Jewish background in the church in Rome to rather kind of look down on him.

And we are no different. We have our badges don't we of superiority in our church culture, every church does. But I tell you I can think of plenty of new Christians who are zealous, who are fruitful, who are serving, who are delighting in Jesus and they shame those whose Christianity lacks inner reality.

Verse 27, then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law.

[22 : 09] there's the first two things God is saying to us this morning. Religious privilege won't save us and religious signs won't save us either.

Now granted there will be those of us here this morning and having examined our hearts we will say I am not trusting in those things. My confidence before God is in the death of Jesus Christ and his death in my place.

But we still need to hear the warning for three reasons. First of all because it is preventative medicine. It is preventative medicine lest in ten years time we simply be spiritual shells so to speak with no inner reality.

Secondly the second reason we need to hear this is because it will strengthen our resolve to proclaim the message of Christ to religious people.

I think it is very very easy to lose our nerve and not to invite the religious person to hear the gospel. Perhaps you have been thinking who would I invite to these naked God events.

[23 : 29] it is very easy isn't it not to invite the religious. But thirdly we need to hear this because it will humble us.

You see I wonder if you have noticed how often in Romans Paul talks about the Jew and the non-Jew. It is there isn't it back in chapter 1 verse 16 to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

It is there in chapter 2 verse 9 the Jew first and also to the Greek. It is there in the next verse chapter 2 verse 10 the Jew first and also to the Greek. The church in Rome was a mixture of Christians from Jewish backgrounds and from non-Jewish backgrounds.

As we imagined earlier it would be very easy for those from a Jewish background to look down on those from non-Jewish backgrounds who didn't quite have the same privileges that they had.

And the point is this. It is that a church will only live in harmony with each other when they're humbled. Now those differences I guess are not our differences but nonetheless we have our differences don't we?

[24 : 45] There are those verse 17 who have been well taught in the past and those who haven't. There are those who boast in God with real genuine assurance and those who lack assurance.

There are those verse 18 who know their Bibles well and those who don't. Those verse 19 who are more natural evangelists than others. Those verse 20 who are more able teachers than others. Those verse 25 who consider themselves to have been baptised in the right way.

And immediately of course the barriers go up don't they? And we are divided between them and us. The keen and the unkeen. We need to hear these verses so that we are humbled.

Daily repentance and daily trust in Jesus Christ and his death in our place by every member of a church is the prerequisite for a church living in harmony with each other.

Religious privilege won't save you. Religious signs won't save you. Thirdly God is right to judge. God is right to judge.

[25 : 59] Chapter 3 verse 1. Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? And I guess we might expect after everything Paul has been saying we might expect the answer to be well frankly none.

But of course that would deny the Old Testaments where we see the great privileges that Jewish people had and how through them God prepared the world for the coming of Jesus.

Above all verse 2 how God spoke to them. How they were entrusted with the very words of God. So you say what went wrong?

Well verse 3 it wasn't that God was unfaithful but that they were which means that God is right to judge verse 4.

Let God be true though everyone were a liar as it is written that you may be justified in your words and prevail when you are judged. Now that is a quote from Psalm 51 in the Old Testament which we read earlier.

[27 : 09] The prayer of King David. the greatest of Old Testament kings. The most privileged of Old Testament kings after his adultery with Bathsheba and having arranged for her husband to be killed in battle.

Why don't we just turn to it. Keep a finger in Romans chapter 3 and turn back to Psalm 51 on page 560 something if I remember.

Page 568. page 568 Psalm 51 and just have a look with me at the first four verses of Psalm 51.

In fact why don't we read them together Psalm 51 verses 1 to 4 let's read them out together. Have mercy on me O God according to your steadfast love according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin for I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me against you you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.

David enjoyed great privileges not only was he a Jew he was God's anointed king but he didn't see his privileges as a get out of jail free card no he knew that God was right to judge and of course the point is simple isn't it back in Romans chapter 3 if God has right to judge David with all his privileges then he's right to judge us as well and Romans 3 verse 5 let's not be so perverse as to argue that perhaps it's a good thing that we sin now and again because it gives God the chance to show how merciful he is but of course Psalm 51 also gives us a glimpse of hope doesn't it as David does cry out to God as he does confess his sins to him he doesn't plead his privileges rather he comes empty handed and confesses his sins you see

[29 : 48] I wondered if you noticed Romans chapter 2 verse 29 but a Jew is one inwardly and circumcision is a matter of the heart by the spirit not by the letter his praise is not from man but from God true circumcision says Paul to be a true believer is a matter of a changed heart getting right with God is not about looking alright on the outside I know much of life is like that isn't it much of life is about what things look like on the outside but getting right with God is not it's not about externals whether the morally upright of last week or the religiously privileged of this week no it is about God giving us the gifts of his Holy Spirit and changing our hearts changing us on the inside but like David that will only happen when we don't trust our religion our religious privileges and instead when we come to God empty handed and cry out to him for mercy it is only when we do that that we are able to hear the message of Romans chapter 3 verse 23 just turn over the page we'll be looking at this in a couple of weeks time it's only when we realise that we can only come to

God empty handed and only when we are willing to do that that we will hear the message of Romans 3 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified in other words put right with God by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus through the rescue that is in Christ through his death on the cross it's only then that God will send us his spirit it's only then that God will give us a new heart to live lives which look not for the praise of others but which live for his praise and God wants us to know this morning that that is the only path to spiritual safety not feeling safe but actually being safe well why don't we pray let's pray together that you may be justified in your words and prevail when you are judged heavenly father we thank you that you are indeed lord and god we praise you that you run your world rightly and justly and therefore that you are right when you say that all of us deserve the judgments and we're sorry heavenly father when we do trust our religious privileges we're sorry when these things divide us against others and we pray heavenly father you would do a deep work in each one of us humble us we pray we pray that we would be those who daily are humbled before you confess our sins to you and our hearts are changed by your holy spirit and we ask it for Jesus sake amen