

"A Matter of the Heart" Romans 2:17–29

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Preacher: Rev. Daniel Avitan

[0 : 00] The Titanic, the RMS Titanic, built in the shipyards of Belfast, at the time was completely state of the art. There had been no seafaring vessel like it before. It was the modern ocean liner built during the peak of maritime engineering during a time, remember this is before the wars, where European morale was at an all time high.

It was a good time to be alive, for most people. The Titanic was supposed to be unsinkable. With much fanfare, she departed Southampton but would never reach New York City, sinking a few hundred kilometers southeast of Newfoundland after hitting an iceberg. Hundreds of people would die.

History is littered with examples of catastrophes and failures that have come about because very wise, very learned, very strong people have found their sense of security in the wrong things. There's a real temporal danger, danger in this mortal life and trusting in false securities. People die. But even more perilous is the eternal danger with misplaced confidence in the wrong things.

Question, as we open up God's word, why do we consistently seek refuge in things that, even with a little study of history, even a little bit of historical knowledge, tell us that they will ultimately fail?

[1 : 35] Does money buy happiness? I mean, it's a bit of an age-old thing to ask. The answer, of course, is no. But here we are, generation after generation, person after person.

More money means better happiness, more fulfillment. Does success provide this kind of fulfillment? Well, being better than others or doing something first, being a pioneer, bring the glory we desire?

The answer, of course, it's a no. No. We continue, and yet we continue to chase after such false securities, thinking that they will satisfy us.

Both in this life, which often they don't, but especially in an eternal sense. The Apostle Paul, he'll continue to sell the problem of sin and idolatry, as we have seen from chapter 1, verse 18, all the way to chapter 3, verse 20.

He continues to sell this problem of sin and idolatry as he proclaims the gospel message by continuing to address the religiously and morally upright.

[2 : 45] So last week we touched on this a bit as well. This week we'll be focusing, actually honing in on the Jewish people. In doing so, Paul is not singling out the Jewish people because they are in some kind of way defective.

Remember the Apostle Paul himself is a Jew. Jesus, the Savior of the world, born to a Jewish family. But rather, what the Apostle Paul will do is make a rhetorical point from the greater to the lesser.

If the religiously and morally upright Jewish people that God himself singled out, and we'll see, gave the law, gave all these privileges, if even they need the gospel, even if they fail, then so do all people.

So in our text, very simply, Paul will articulate this by examining two dangers and then presenting a solution. Two dangers and then presenting a solution. Let's jump right into it.

Verse 17. And we'll read verses 17 to 24. But if you yourself, sorry, but if you call yourself a Jew, and before we even go on, we have to pause there.

[4 : 00] Okay? The Apostle Paul is using unbelievably inflammatory language into the ears of the first century Jewish population of Rome, and really the entire world.

If? What do you mean by if? Jewish people had this understanding then, as many do now, that there's no if about whether somebody can be a Jew or not.

One cannot not be a Jew if they were born a Jew. There is no if. The Apostle Paul here is poking right at the very sensitive point in the Jewish psyche.

If you yourself claim to be a Jew. If you yourself claim to be a Jew. But it's important to remember, again, thinking that this is a rhetorical, a few sentences that provide a rhetorical basis from the greater to the lesser, we can understand that Paul is not some anti-Jewish Christian crusader. He's not trying to tear down the entirety of the Jewish heritage. Again, he is one himself. We'll see in the months that follow, when we get to chapters 9 to 11 of Romans, that Paul has this unquenchable love for his fellow Jews, that they would live out the fullness of their heritage.

[5 : 32] He is not trying to rip them apart. So then, what is he doing? Let's continue reading. We'll read at the beginning of verse 17. And we'll read to verse 20. 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.

Verse 21. You then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? We'll pause quickly right here. Paul is laying out a number of key distinctives that defined Jewish identity, and were rooted in the law.

There's a lot of overlap between moralistic and religious teaching. It's hard to kind of parse them out. But Paul here really is highlighting some key distinctives of Jewish identity based on behavior that are rooted in the law.

The Apostle Paul, what's interesting here, never condemns these distinctives. In fact, all of them, they are very good. The law is very good. In fact, it is perfect.

Having confidence in God is a good thing. Knowing his will, understanding right from wrong, guiding, teaching, instruction, instructing, all very, very good things.

[7 : 10] The mission of God's people was to instruct as they had been instructed and to teach as they had been taught. So we see here that these distinctives are actually rooted in something that the prophet Isaiah will call being a light to the nations.

They are doing it. However, as God's chosen people, the Jewish nation are not leaning into this in the right kind of way, but it has become a source of pride for them.

What do I mean? As God's chosen people, the Jewish nation was given two, again, this is generally speaking, two identity markers that would define them.

The first was circumcision. We'll get to that in the second point. So just kind of put your finger there as a bookmark. The first was circumcision, given to Abraham, the father of the faith.

The second identity marker came centuries later after Israel was rescued out of Egypt and brought into the wilderness. They were given the law at Mount Sinai.

[8 : 20] This is a key, key, key aspect of the biblical narrative. They were given the law at Sinai before entering the promised land. The law served as a kind of constitution that defined what it meant to be the covenant people and how they were to act.

They were already the covenant people. Again, we're going to see this in the next section with Abraham and circumcision. They're already the covenant people. God had already rescued them out of Egypt.

And then he gave them the law as, again, a kind of constitution. But it's a bit more than that. It was marching orders, but it was God revealing his very character to these people.

Remarkable thing, the giving of the law. But by the first century, so this is hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years after Israel was given the law, by the first century, possession of the law had become a sort of self-righteous pride among the religious leaders.

It was less about keeping the law as a response to God's salvation and God making the covenant with his people, but rather about just simply possessing the law. And it gave them a prestige among the other nations.

[9 : 35] So the law that was a gift from God, that didn't define them, but was, again, an expression of God's love towards them, and in response they were to love God in return and keep the law, the law became the very identity marker for them.

And they became prideful, and they became hypocritical, and they claimed to have the very highest level of morality, and yet their integrity was bankrupt.

Not to say that every single Jew acted this way. Again, Paul, what is he doing here? He is using this as a rhetorical device, but it's rooted in truth. Verse 21 to 23.

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. How could this possibly happen? On one hand, it's easy to see. No one is truly consistent with their behavior.

[10:52] No teacher always adheres to what they teach. As they say, to err is human. This is expected. But there's something much deeper at play here. Paul, again, he is addressing this deep hypocrisy whereby the law is used as almost an excuse to sin.

Who are you to tell me? I'm the teacher. I have found loopholes. I have found ways around the law, justifications for law breaking. That's the implication here.

It ultimately proves that those who had the law, the Jewish people, they did not truly understand the purpose of the law or they forgot it. For they were trusting in, again, this possession of the law as a source of the true identity and justification and worth.

But as good as these things are, and they are incredibly good, it just proves how unbelievably strong and pervasive the pull towards idolatry truly is.

For what Paul is saying here is that idolatry is so strong that one could commit adultery with the things of God themselves. Again, the possession of the law, the possession of the very gift of God is being relied upon more than God himself.

[12:19] We see, again, the depths of idolatry. So, what we have here is the danger of relying upon a type of morality to give us an eternal hope and an eternal joy and an eternal identity.

But our identity can't be in those that possess the law, but in the one who gives the law to us. Treating the things of God as if they were God, it's actually even more horrific than pagan idolatry. How? Because the things of God being turned into idols, we'll see in verse 24, it causes others to be led astray so much so that they will blaspheme the name of God.

If you go back to verse 17, we'll realize that this isn't just a Jewish problem, but that this is an us problem. The majority, if not all of us, here are not Jews or have Jewish background.

So, if you go back to verse 17, and you read, but if you call yourself a Jew, you remove Jew and you add Christian.

[13:44] Or you put in baptized. Or if you put in Anglican. Or if you put in upright. Or you put in donor to the food bank.

Or you put in excellent attendance record at church or big giver, whatever it may be, you'll soon realize that we have a terrible propensity to treat morality and religious adherence and affiliation as the means for eternal security.

Earlier this week, I was talking with some people about this text and very self-deprecatingly talking about how there's sometimes I say, I'm glad I'm an Anglican.

And then what follows after is because I'm not like, insert that tradition. It's not that I'm happy that Jesus Christ saved me from my sins. I'm glad I'm not like them.

There's nothing wrong with being an Anglican. It's nothing wrong with our tradition. In fact, I'm one convictionally. So are some of you. But so easily, we can take the things of God and treat them as if they were God himself.

[15:00] Finding our identity, ultimate identity in these things. And it's a false refuge. If the Jewish people chosen by God, recipients of the law, no God's will, no true morality, our teachers and guides, if they can turn the things of God into idols, it only proves how dangerous idolatry truly is to humanity.

Remember, this is an us problem. And as I've already mentioned, in doing so, it's not that we just thumb our nose at God, but we make God's name very disgusting to other people.

Verse 24, for as it is written, the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you. Fact is, if we call ourselves Christians, again, if we call ourselves Christians, Paul could also say, you are children of God.

If my children consistently misbehave or are undisciplined or rude or violent, and not just because they're in some kind of developmental stage, but that's who they are, it will reflect poorly on me. Questions will be raised about my fitness as a parent. I think this is what is happening here. We are God's people except that we are not acting like God, we are acting like devils.

[16:28] Some of you enjoy the rest of this history podcast. It's a great podcast if you haven't listened to it. They're on a six, they're right in the middle of a six week, sorry, a six episode series on

the fall of the Incas.

And in one instance, they relay this story of an Inca chieftain who was tortured and threatened with death by fire by the Spanish. But, he could avoid it all if he was only baptized and confessed faith in Jesus and then he would have a quick death and a proper burial and would go to heaven.

And he says he'd rather take the fire because if heaven were full of Spaniards, he didn't want to be there. Oof. What we do reflects upon God.

It's true. In the same way what your children do if you have children reflect upon you. And sometimes it's fair, sometimes it's not fair. In the case of how we reflect upon God, it's never fair because he is perfect and we bring dishonor upon the only name that should be truly honored.

Fact is, we reflect our king. So if we trust in idols, even those that are godly and good idols, we will seldom resemble him and this watching world will take notice and it will curse our God.

[17:54] So if moral superiority is the cause of a false sense of security, so false morality being the first danger, then so too was circumcision and we'll get into this next section starting in verse 25.

Circumcision, which was the religious means by which a Jewish person became associated with God in an irreversible way. Turn with me now to verse 25 and now we'll be on page 14, verse 25.

For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. It's quickly a brief note about circumcision.

Circumcision was the sign of the covenant that God first made with Abraham way back in the earlier chapters of Genesis. Covenants and signs were not unique to ancient Israel or the Bible.

They existed in the ancient world and they were usually agreements made by a powerful king or ruler or strong man that usually conquered or came into a pretty lopsided agreement with a lesser, weaker partner.

[19:09] The agreement was made. The agreement was usually written out for both to have a copy of and then the two parties would act out what would happen if that agreement was broken.

So, if you remember the scene in Genesis where God commands Abraham to take a bunch of animals, cut them in two and put them on either side and then he makes Abraham fall asleep.

It's a bizarre scene. If you're reading it for the first time, I won't get into it now, but this is exactly that. Circumcision also is an example of such a covenant, such a sign of the covenant.

Different in some respects but very similar in many. How so? Circumcision, a sign of the covenant God made with Abraham, remembering that Abraham first had faith in God, made a covenant whereby Abraham's descendants would be innumerable.

That was the promise. I will make your offspring innumerable. See the stars? Try to count them. There'll be more. See the sand on the seashore?

[20:24] Try to count every grain. You can't. There'll be more of them. But also, he made a covenant that through his descendant, singular, all the nations would be blessed.

Because this was a sign of, and then he gave the sign of circumcision. And because circumcision was a sign of this covenant, it demanded covenant faithfulness.

Otherwise, that promise would be rendered void. And we see that circumcision, the removal of the foreskin. If Abraham himself didn't keep the covenant, that his seed would not spread.

His offspring would be cut off. So you fast forward to the Apostle Paul, 2,200 years later, Paul here is writing the book of Romans to both Jewish and non-Jewish people in a city he has yet to visit.

And we are finding that the Jewish people were finding their security not in the covenant that God made with Abraham, this everlasting covenant that God made with Abraham, but in the sign of the covenant.

[21:31] So it's not just that God made this covenant and promised to us we need to fulfill it, we need to fulfill it. Instead, he said, we're circumcised.

That's good enough. It would be like you're on a trip and you see a sign that points to your destination and you just put your arm around that sign and said, I'm here.

Right? That's what a sign does. It points to an ultimate purpose, an ultimate destination. You don't get to that destination, you don't get to that purpose by boasting about the sign.

That sign points you to where you need to go. Paul, again, with this in mind and with this as a background, he takes it even a step further.

Verse 26 to 28. So if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?

[22 : 30] Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. And this is, again, inflammatory language.

Okay? For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. Wow. Huge, huge inflammatory language.

But again, remember, Paul here, he is using rhetorical devices to communicate eternal truths. So what he is saying here is that a heart that is cold towards the Lord, trusting instead in physical markers, in group association and the like, is far inferior to that of an uncircumcised pagan who turns to the Lord in faith, whose heart is warmed to the Lord.

The circumcised flesh, again, was a reminder to trust in the Lord and to have a circumcised heart. A heart, again, that is embracing the things of God.

It's a call to faith. Just as Abraham believed God and God counted it as righteousness. You cannot trust the sign of the covenant more than the one who makes the covenant in the first place.

[23 : 49] but remember, this is an us problem. This is an us problem. Not a Jewish problem, it's an us problem. It's a genuine struggle both inside and outside of the church.

What do I mean? So inside the church. We can struggle with a Christianity that is purely external, lacking the interior life the Lord desires.

We may come to church every week and you start to see there's some overlaps of the previous section. We come to church every week. We are gathered as the church in the right church to have our false refuges, our false securities affirmed rather than come to church to have the word convict us of our sin.

So, put it another way, we come to church and we sit upon the word. We do not sit under the word. We use the things of God to justify our lives. And to find great hope in them.

Some of you might know this if you come from an Anglican background. I do not. But cultural Anglicanism has this deep problem where people are associated with a church, they never attend, or they attend very seldomly, they have a child or a grandchild, and they get their kid done.

[25 : 13] What does that mean? Bring the kid to get baptized, baptized, and then they're baptized, and they're great. They're good. They've checked off the boxes. To never go to church, to never live a Christian life.

The external life, excellent. The internal life, vacuous, bankrupt. But we do this as well. And for those that are outside of church or outside of the Christian faith, which you might actually feel a bit of condemnation, good condemnation, good conviction about this as well.

And this is especially the case in a suburban context like the one we're in. There's great temptation to be in the right neighborhood, to make the right investments, to have your children, if you have them on the right sports teams, to not have many children, to keep it to two, to travel to the right destinations, on vacation, to snap the right pictures, to put the right hashtags, if that's even a thing anymore, I don't know, to have the semblance of being healthy and well-formed, but inside we lack meaning, we lack joy, we lack purpose.

And then when those ill feelings come up, when those ill feelings of feeling really rudderless in life, the things that we trust in are eerily quiet when we need them to reassure us.

A false sense of belonging. Why then do we have this terrible habit of fussing over the externals and neglecting the internals?

[26 : 51] Why? There's many more reasons, I'll suggest two. The first, whether or not we claim to believe in God, I think last week made the case very well that eternity is written in the hearts of men, which is to say that we have this idea that there is some kind of eternal force out there, whether we call him God or the universe, but there's something out there bigger than this life that we don't truly believe in an omniscient,!

omnipresent God who sees and knows all, so we can hide things. We're good at hiding things. The second thing, it's just far easier to look good than be good.

It's easier. easier. It's easier not to do the hard work of self-examination. But I would suggest a third thing that's even deeper than both of those things, and it's really the true problem of humanity, is that it is impossible to have a truly well-formed interior life that will give us true security in the face of life's difficulties and this mortal life.

we cannot circumcise our own hearts. We cannot truly renovate our interior lives to the extent that we need. We can get better habits, we can say no to certain vices, but ultimately, ultimately, we cannot live a truly righteous interior life.

We just can't. We cannot circumcise our own hearts. How then can we have a circumcised heart? So we have two dangers. Here's the solution.

[28 : 34] 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.

See, the people of God who are called by God, given a covenant by God, given a sign of that covenant by God, who know God's will and God's ways and boast in knowing him, who praise the name of the Lord with their words, which is interesting because the name Jew derives from the tribe of Judah, which literally means praise God.

They need to find their eternal security in the one true God, forsaking all other false securities, all other false refuges that they may find elsewhere, so that they can hear, well done, good and faithful servant, not from friends, not from a boss, not from spouses, not from parents, but from God himself.

But our propensity to fail this call, it is so very obvious and the consequence of breaking the covenant is being cut off from God.

God, okay, we break the covenant, what happens? We suffer the consequences of breaking that covenant and what is it?

[30 : 01] At least for the Jewish people, it's being cut off from God, not knowing him any longer, not being a part of his covenant people. But the remarkable thing is that Jesus was cut off instead of us.

This means that the one who made the covenant, for Jesus truly is God, God the Son of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that the one who made the covenant with his people, knowing that they would fail from the beginning, took upon himself the consequence of their failure.

It was always God's plan to do this. Hundreds of years before Christ comes on the scene, the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 53, which is, I mean, dynamite prophecies in the Old Testament, says that the Messiah would be cut off, cut off, out of the land of the living.

And we see this. Jesus is upon the cross. He cries out to God, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why have you cut me off from your covenant people? That's exactly what happened. Jesus, upon the cross, he was cut off from his family, from his disciples, from his people, and from his father. He died a shameful, a completely utterly shameful death that should have been ours.

[31 : 23] We should have been cut off. And in doing so, he conquers death forever, rising from the dead to new life, and to inaugurate a new covenant that would be extended to both Jew and Gentile alike.

What would be the hallmark of this new covenant? That we would say, we're Christians, we go to church. No. No. Prophet Ezekiel says in chapter 36, verse 26, this is God speaking, and I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you.

And I will remove the heart of stone, which is to say, the uncircumcised heart. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and give you a heart of flesh.

I will do the work. What only what you desperately need is what only I can do, and I will do it. You see, circumcision of the heart, something we could never do ourselves, it's a gift from God, accomplished by the work of the Holy Spirit.

That's why it says in verse 29, that this is a matter of the heart, by the spirit, not by the letter, not by the law, not by circumcision, not by the things that we can do in our own strength to muster up enough courage to stand before the Lord and say, look at me, aren't I well put together, isn't my interior life so wonderful?

[32 : 49] So the call of God's covenant people is to have faith in him, and then to believe that he will do what only he can do to give us supernatural strength and a supernatural cleansing to circumcise our hearts.

do not leave here and be okay with a heart that is stony, okay? A heart that is uncircumcised, a heart that says, you know, I think I actually can rest on my laurels a bit more.

Instead, cry out to the Lord that he will transform you by his spirit and that he will do this incredibly important and necessary surgery, taking out stone, putting in flesh, circumcising your heart.

Let us put our hope in true security, a true refuge, so that we can have eternity with our Father forever. forever.