

# The Great Effort of Trying to Fool God

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's pray together. Father, we thank you so much that we are able to gather together now and call you Father.

It is a remarkable and wonderful thing that you have caused us to be counted as your family. What a remarkable thing.

Will you grant us, as your family, to be able to hear your voice, our Father's voice now, not my voice. Lord, help us to hear what you're saying in your word.

Thank you for that. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Go ahead and sit down. And if you would take those Bibles that you were just looking at and open them back up to the page you were looking at, to page 940, that would be fantastic.

One of the things about the Bible that I find really surprising, hopefully if you spend time with the Bible you'll find lots of things surprising.

[ 1 : 20 ] If you never find anything surprising when you're reading the Bible, just check yourself that you're paying attention. One of the funny things about the Bible is that it is really hard on religion.

Have you ever noticed that? Does that strike you as odd? It strikes me as odd because, you know, I mean, it's, I think, almost by anybody's standards, it is, certainly, even if you're not a Christian, you would have to admit that it's one of the greatest religious books in history.

Right? I mean, it's all about knowing God. It's all about following God. It's all about doctrine about God. And yet, in spite of all of that, it is absolutely searing in its critique of religion.

And it's not just one bit of the Bible. It's a thing that goes right through the whole thing. I mean, you can read in the Old Testament and hear the, you know, the main story arc of the Old Testament and of the New Testament, incidentally, is all about the people of Israel.

The special people of God who are tasked with representing God to the world. And they're given the law. We're going to catch up with this in just a minute.

[ 2 : 41 ] But the story of the Old Testament, when it comes to Israel, is extremely critical. I mean, you see their flaws again and again.

You look at the stories of Jesus, if you've read the Gospels. I mean, who, if you read through the Gospels, the main conflict between Jesus and the people he comes into conflict with is almost inevitably, almost every time, it's the orthodox religious establishment of his day.

It's the people with, it's the most religious people of his day that he gets in fights with. And you'll find that throughout the Bible, the Bible is always having just a remarkably critical approach to religion.

And the same is happening tonight in our passage. Last week, if you were here, we talked about the first half of chapter 2 of Romans.

And we looked at the difference between hypocritical religion and authentic repentance. And tonight, Paul is just continuing on a very similar theme.

[ 3 : 46 ] He's absolutely merciless toward religion. And it seems to me, you know, the past few weeks as I've been thinking about this a little bit and praying about this, there's something remarkably contemporary about all this.

This section of Romans is so hard on religion because it seems to me that as a society right now, we have, you may not agree with this, but it seems to me that we are extremely polarized when it comes to religion.

I mean, you've got the super religious folks over here and we all like to think badly of, then there's the anti-religious people over here.

And, you know, you get like the new atheists, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, things like that. And I imagine there's all sorts of reasons for why we're so polarized as a society about religion.

I expect some of it has to do with the fact that in the last 50 years, religion around the world has really expanded remarkably, particularly Christianity and Islam. I expect it also has something to do with 9-11 that we've seen as a society that religion is capable of doing horrible, horrible things. [ 5 : 03 ] And so it's a frightening thing. Well, tonight I want to look at this passage and I want us to consider this issue of religion. And I want us to look at three things.

First of all, we're going to see why God is not impressed with religion by itself. That's the first thing. Second thing, we're going to look at why God is not impressed with not religion. And the third thing we're going to look at is what God is impressed with. Okay? So first of all, why God is not impressed with religion. A little bit of context here. I just mentioned, you know, we're looking at the second half of chapter 2 in Romans.

And last week, Paul was going after hypocrites. He was going after respectable, moral people. And he looks at those respectable, moral people and he says, God is not impressed with you.

And God is not nearly as impressed with you as you think he is. And he's not impressed with you because you're hypocrites. And in particular, you're self-righteous.

[ 6 : 10 ] You judge others. But the minute you judge others, you're revealing the fact that you do almost exactly the same things that they do. Now, tonight, Paul is doing a very similar thing, except he's zeroing in on his own tribe.

Paul says lots of different places. I mean, he illustrates that he was very much an Orthodox Jew. And so in this context, he looks at his own people, his own group, his own tribe.

He zeroes in on religious Jews and he says, friends, you've got the same problem. We've got the same problem. Your religion, Orthodox as it is, is a megaphone for hypocrisy.

It's just a megaphone for hypocrisy. Look at verses 23 and 24. Verses 23 and 24 are the worst thing a religious person could possibly hear about themselves.

Look at verse 23. You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. Verse 24. For it is written, the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.

[ 7 : 28 ] Now, I'm a pretty religious guy. I, you know, I, I'm a professional, you know, like I have special shirts.

Okay. I do. And this is the worst thing anybody could possibly say about me. Because, you know, Paul's talking to people who have the law.

Do you know what he means there? He's not talking about civic law. He's talking about religious law. He's talking in particular about the first five books of the Old Testament. And, you know, certainly in Paul's mind, in the, in the, in the world of the Bible, within Christianity and within Judaism, the law presented the very best religious system that anybody had ever seen.

Right. I mean, it gave the best information that anybody had ever had about God. It gave the best pattern for obeying God and worshipping God and following God.

And in spite of all of that, Paul looks at the people who were the best exemplary followers of the law that the world had ever seen. He looks at them and he says, yeah, but it hasn't changed you much.

[ 8 : 51 ] The nations look at you and they blaspheme your God on behalf of, because of you. I mean, he's saying that Israel has still ended up being hypocrites, even though they had the best religious resources that you could possibly have at that time.

And in this passage, it's almost as if Israel's possession of the law, it's almost like it made the whole situation worse.

In this passage, it's almost as if the law made Israel's deep-seated hypocrisy more evident. Religion can be a megaphone for hypocrisy.

Now, can you see why this is absolutely catastrophic for a religious person to hear? This chapter means, among other things, that you can have all the right information about God.

You can know all the right things to do to serve God correctly. You can be, in your own way, deeply committed to God. And in spite of it all, you can still end up a hypocrite.

[ 10 : 12 ] Now, I would think that this should rattle the walls of this place just a little bit. Let me talk just briefly to the St. John's family.

If you're here and you're not part of the St. John's family, you can tune out for the next couple minutes. I'll tell you when to tune back in, so listen up. As a church, we are deeply committed to orthodoxy, right?

We are deeply committed to the Bible. We love truth. We love truth spoken truly and accurately.

And we love truth to the extent that we're willing to sacrifice for it. We have sacrificed for it. We probably will sacrifice for it more in the future. We value being committed, and we value consistency and obedience, all of those things.

And let me be clear, all of those things are not just good. They are great gifts from God. But the thing is, this passage forces us to consider something pretty sobering.

[ 11 : 25 ] Our orthodoxy, by itself, does not impress God. Our commitment, by itself, does not impress God.

Our religion, and all the things that we do, and all the right things we do, by itself, does not impress God. Why?

Why doesn't it impress God? Because you can say all the right things. You can check all the right boxes. You can show up at all the right meetings. You can play in the band. You can preach behind this pulpit or that pulpit.

You can pray publicly. You can do all of those things. And inside your heart harbor a hypocrisy that does not go unnoticed by God.

I mean, friends, you can preach an orthodox sexual ethic all the while having lust in your heart.

[ 12 : 33 ] That doesn't impress God. You can be rigorously pro-life. And ready to do all sorts of things to save the unborn.

But if you fail to love people who have abortions, you are not impressing God. You're a hypocrite. You can read your Bible every day.

And you can go to Regent College. And you can study the depths of theology. And every single minute you spend time studying, it's just swelling a heart filled with pride.

And it doesn't impress God. Okay. Religion, by itself, doesn't impress God. Because oftentimes, it just becomes a megaphone of our own hypocrisies.

Okay. But we're tempted. You hear things like that. And for a lot of us, we kind of go, yep. Yep.

Okay. Everybody else tune back in. Yep. I always knew organized religion was a fraud.

[ 13 : 44 ] You know. And so instead of organized religion, I want to just chart my own path of spirituality. You know, that kind of thing. And that sounds appealing. And a lot of people do it.

According to this passage, it doesn't really get you anywhere. Look at verse 14. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law.

They show, verse 15, that the work of the law is written on their hearts. While their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.

Okay. It may be a little bit of a confusing verse there. Paul's talking to Gentiles, right? He's talking to people who, or he's talking about Gentiles, people who don't have as much information about God. They're less religious. They may be religious of, in kind of their own devising. But Paul says they still have a conscience. Right? I mean, and sometimes their conscience directs them.

[ 14 : 54 ] They end up doing exactly what God wants. But the bottom line in verses 14 and 15 is that they end up doing the same things as the religious people.

They end up doing, they end up in the same boat. But even if you're not religious, even if you're not religious, you still, you know, set some sort of moral standard.

It may be a really high one from your perspective. It may be a fairly low one from your own perspective, whatever. But if you're honest, when you think about the moral standard that you set, even if you're not a religious person, if you're honest, you realize that you're, the reality is that you're always hitting beneath the mark.

And if you're, if you're really self-aware, you'll realize that your conscience at one minute is accusing you, at another minute it's excusing you. Your conscience will tell you one day that you are a hypocrite as well.

You're just a more hidden one. You don't have the megaphone. But you're in the same boat. You see, religious people find that their religion, the whole system, becomes this kind of advertisement for their own failings.

[ 16 : 09 ] But non-religious people end up finding that their conscience does much the same thing. And that's why, whether you're religious or you're not religious, all of us are deeply affected by guilt.

You might not agree with me. One of the ways that you can tell that guilt is a big problem for all of us is how offended we get when we get judged by other people.

Why are we so offended when we feel judged by somebody else? Isn't it in part because we feel a little insecure?

I mean, really secure people would, somebody would say something negative against them and they just kind of go, well, okay, maybe, but I don't know. Okay, let me deal with that a little bit and think about it.

Eh, not really. Okay, I'm going to move on. But a really insecure person is going to get angry. It's going to get offended. And our phobia of being judged by other people betrays that deep down, deep down, we're afraid that we're not as good as we should be.

[ 17 : 21 ] Deep down, we know that in one sense we are a sham. And verse 16 tells us, we went over this last week, that one day God will investigate the secrets of hearts.

And on that day, religious people and non-religious people are going to be in the same boat. Okay. Why God is not that impressed with religion. Why not religion doesn't really help.

Third thing, what does impress God? Look at verse 28. 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. And then note this last phrase, that very last phrase.

His praise is not from man, but from God. Look at that last phrase again. There is a type of human being.

[ 18 : 24 ] Paul's kind of calling him a true Jew. There is a type of human being that God praises. Doesn't that sound the wrong way around?

You would think that we should be praising God. That's true. But this verse is telling us that there is a type of person who receives praise from God. There's a kind of person that impresses God.

And according to this passage, it's someone who is circumcised in heart by the spirit. Look at the verse again. Now, what in the universe does that mean?

Circumcised in heart by the spirit. Okay. Let me try to explain this a little bit. So stick with me. Okay. Okay. The reason religion tends to make hypocrites out of us.

The reason even the best religion tends to make hypocrites out of us is that outward religion does not have the resources to address the deep problem of the human heart.

[ 19 : 24 ] And according to Romans, and we'll come back to this again and again, our deepest human problem is our heart. At the core of our being, our heart is dysfunctional.

Our heart is miswired. Our heart is wired to reject God. Our heart is wired to not love God.

And because our hearts are all haywire, you can have all the right information. You can have all the right ritual. You can have all the right trappings.

It can all be true and correct and precise. And yet it doesn't touch your heart. Outward religion alone is like putting a band-aid on a cancer.

It just doesn't help. So look back at verse 29. God is looking for people whose hearts are marked by his spirit.

[ 20 : 29 ] God is looking for people whose hearts are rewired by his spirit. You see, if it's true that our hearts are deeply committed to rejecting God, then all our religious efforts aren't really going to matter.

What really matters is that we need our hearts changed. It's got to be an inside job. What we need is for God to break in on us.

Not to give us just outward standards, but to break in on us. We need God to do in us what we cannot do for ourselves. We need God to come and bind our hearts to himself in love.

Now, that's exactly what the Holy Spirit's job is. The Holy Spirit's job is to break into our God-rejecting hearts, turn them inside out, so that instead of rejecting God, we are bound to God in love.

The Spirit makes a bond of love between us and the Father. Do you know what I mean by bond of love? Let me try to explain this.

[ 21 : 44 ] My son, when my son was born, I remember driving home from the hospital with him in the back seat. I was scared to death because, well, my brain was a little foggy and it was kind of funny to drive.

And in the middle of the drive home, I thought about the fact that at home, I have a big black dog. And if anybody knows me, I like dogs.

I'm a dog person. And I like my dog a great deal. We were just in the endowment lands today with Greg and his dog. But when I thought about, excuse me, when I thought about my son meeting my dog for the first time, something happened to me.

Something went wiggy in me. I thought to myself, I had this overwhelming, uncontrolled, primordial urge to protect my son at all costs.

And I had this image of, if that dog so much as breathes wrong toward my son, I will break it.

[ 22 : 52 ] I will break it with my hands and my teeth. I mean, it was just this absolute... The dog was fine.

Still a hole. Unbroken. Unbroken. But I tell the story. In a day, there was this bond of love between me and my son.

So, you know, and when that bond occurs, a father will be totally loyal to his son, totally ready to sacrifice anything for his son. That's a bond of love. And it's the same kind of bond that existed between Jesus and the father.

You remember Jesus' baptism? Remember, Jesus goes under the water and he comes up and God speaks. What does he say there? He says, this is my son. And I'm well pleased with him.

And that bond of love between Jesus and the father is the thing that animated Jesus' own ministry. Everywhere you go, he's powered by the spirit. It animated his obedience.

[ 23 : 57 ] It animated his teaching. It animated his miracles. It animated everything about Jesus.

And it animated and motivated him to go to the cross as well. And the wonderful thing we're going to find in Romans, this is the first verse that hints of it.

We're going to get a lot more explicit when we go along, particularly in chapter 8. One of the key themes of Romans is Jesus is inviting us into the relationship, that bond of love that exists between the father and himself.

And it is the spirit's job to bring us in. Now, friends, this is the mark of true Christianity. This is the thing that makes Christianity different than just mere outward religion.

The mark of a Christian is the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit creating that bond of love, much like what existed between Jesus and the father.

True Christianity is when the spirit grants you to see and to know and to receive the limitless love of the father in such a way that it, again, animates your life.

[ 25 : 10 ] Now, we need to end, but I want to show you one more thing. Anyway, when you come to know that bond of love between the father and yourself through the spirit, when that becomes a reality in your life, you'll realize why it is that the Bible is so utterly hard on religion.

You see, outward religion alone tries to regulate our behavior, but it fails. God wants something different. God wants inward transformation so that we live in the eternal joy of the father's affection. I mean, the Bible has just a much bigger vision for things than outward religion could ever come up with. And when you truly receive the work of the spirit in your life, it will transform you.

It will cause you to obey way more than outward religion ever did alone. You'll read your Bible more. You'll love orthodoxy more.

You'll be more committed to the people of God. You'll even be able to love people you wouldn't naturally like, you know, which is really important. You'll, I mean, and you'll do all of that far more consistently than you ever would have because you'll be motivated by love and not by fear or insecurity or guilt or any of these other things that typically drive.

[ 26 : 40 ] Hypocrites. Hypocrites. Hypocrites. Hypocrites. Hypocrites. But it will also motivate you in humility. Hypocrites. Hypocrites. Hypocrites. Hypocrites. Hypocrites. It'll motivate you in humility because you'll be able to see that everything you've received is a gift from God.

And that you are utterly not worthy of it. And yet in spite of your absolute unworthiness, the father has loved you and shown his love by sending his son and filling you with his Holy Spirit.

And when you see his kindness and your unworthiness, you won't have to hide your guilt anymore. Which means you won't be a hypocrite because you'll admit you are one.

And the quickest way to not be a hypocrite is to recognize you are one. You see how that works? So what does Jesus want to do tonight?

I mean, it's really simple. Jesus wants to give you his Holy Spirit. Jesus wants to renew you in the Holy Spirit.

[ 27 : 42 ] And some of you said, oh, I'm a Christian. I've already received the Holy Spirit. That's fine. Ephesians tells us that you can go on being filled with the Spirit. So don't worry about that. And

for those of you who perhaps have never walked with Jesus before, please know that when you come to church, you are not being invited to just sign on to some religious system that is, I don't know, nice or something like that.

Something far more than that. God himself wants to erupt into your heart. And he wants you to know the Father's affection in a way that you were designed to know and yet have never tasted but have always wanted to.

That's what Jesus is inviting you to. And so what we need to do is ask Jesus because Jesus never gets tired of giving and we never get filled up with the Spirit.

So let's ask him. Amen. Amen. As Jim was preaching, I kept wanting to say, preach it, brother. But we're Anglicans and we don't see those things. But we are going to take a few moments to spend some time with God. So please adopt the position, either sitting or kneeling.

[ 29 : 26 ] And let's just take a moment to gather our minds and recognize that we are coming before our Father. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Thanks. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. though they are far from home, will still feel as if they are among family.

[ 30 : 47 ] Lord, in your mercy. Father God, we continue to trust on you for the outcome of the latest legal action.

Be merciful to us by pouring out your Holy Spirit upon us to grant us knowledge and wisdom in discerning your purposes, irrespective of a favourable or unfavourable decision from the legal system.

Lord, in your mercy. Father, we again find ourselves in your presence praying over financial issues. You have blessed us so greatly as a congregation that there is no reason for us to find ourselves in this position again.

We pray that you would soften the hearts of those who do not see giving as an act of worship. Lord, in your mercy.

[ 31 : 59 ] And if you turn to the back of your service sheet, we will see the words of the prayer that our Saviour Christ taught us. And so together, let us pray.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us your sins, and we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen. Amen. Just a couple things as the musicians are coming up.

During this next song, we will be taking an offering. If you're not from St. John's, please don't feel any obligation to give. You're more than welcome to, but don't feel any obligation. The other thing is that there will be a couple people in this chapel over here who would love to pray with you.

[ 33 : 06 ] If there's anything going on in your life that you would like someone to pray with you about, they would love to do that. So that's available. Please stand as we sing these last couple of songs.

The mystery of the cross I cannot comprehend The agony of Calvary You're the perfect holy one

Thanks, honey.

Thank you.