

Lesson 6: Indictment of the Religious Man

Romans 2:17-29

I. Knowledge of God's will lead the religious person to a false sense of security undermined sin.

A. The religious person becomes confident in their position with God because of their knowledge of the Bible.

¹⁷ But if

you bear the name "Jew"
and rely upon the **Law**
and boast in God,

¹⁸ and know *His* will
and approve the things that are essential,
being instructed out of the **Law**,

B. The religious person's confidence emboldens them to teach others the worldview they have received in the Bible.

¹⁹ and

you are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind,
a light to those who are in darkness,
²⁰ a corrector of the foolish,
a teacher of the immature,
having in the **Law** the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth,

C. Yet, the religious person does not live out the moral vision received in the Bible.

²¹ you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself?

You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal?

²² You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?

You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

²³ You who boast in the **Law**, through your breaking the **Law**, do you dishonor God?

II. Indictment: Religious knowledge and ritual do not make up for failure in moral practice.

²⁴ For "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you," just as it is written.

²⁵ For indeed **circumcision** is of value if you practice the **Law**;
but if

you are a transgressor of the **Law**, your **circumcision** has become **uncircumcision**.

²⁶ So if

the **uncircumcised** man keeps the requirements of the **Law**, will not his **uncircumcision** be regarded as **circumcision**?

²⁷ And

he who is physically **uncircumcised**, if he keeps the **Law**, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the **Law** and **circumcision** are a transgressor of the **Law**?

²⁸ For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is **circumcision** that which is outward in the flesh.

²⁹ But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and **circumcision** is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

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Introduction: The Three Circles of the Religious Defense

Paul declared in his thesis to the Romans, "I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes for in it the righteousness of God is revealed." Paul is excited about the gospel as the source of salvation. Salvation implies the need to be saved. There is a great problem that must be solved. Before Paul can offer the solution of the gospel, that is how is it that God's righteousness is revealed, he must first establish the dilemma. What do all people need to be saved from? The answer is that we all need salvation from our own sin. Though we can equally say that we need salvation from the wrath of God which must come on those who have sinned against him." Do I really need to fear the wrath of God? Or I am basically good. God is loving. Aren't I safe?

Paul recognizes that he must disarm us of the illusion of our own goodness and safety before a holy God. So, he has taken us to court. He started his prosecution with the pagan person who has turned

his back on God. But then he included in the moral person who stands in judgment over the pagan, yet, does not live up to their own moral standards, much less God's moral standards. The moral person might adjust their defense to say, "I stand not only on my moral behavior, but on my moral and religious behavior. My religion makes up for any moral failure."

Being a skilled prosecutor, Paul addresses the religious defense in our present passage, Romans 2:17-29. Before we get into the text, let's think a little more about the position of the religious person.

We can imagine that the defendant in this section of Romans is being asked to answer the following question. "If you were to get hit by a bus in the next five minutes and go to the gates of heaven, and God were to ask you, 'Why should I let you come in and enjoy eternal life with me?', what would your answer be?" It's a thoughtful question. In fact, you might want to pause right here and think what your own answer would be to that question. If God asked you, "Why should I let you into heaven?", what would you say?

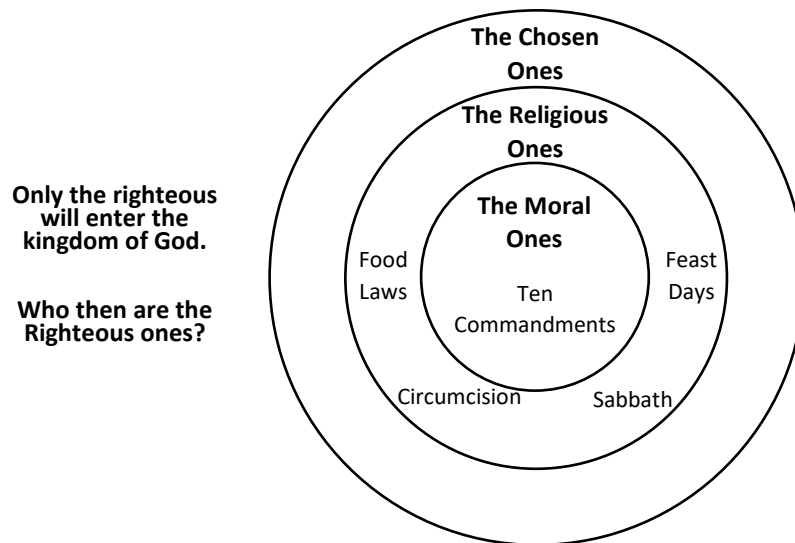
When I ask this question, I get three different types of answers from religious people. (1) First, some religious people have the expectation that they are going to get in simply because they are a member of a certain people group or denomination. They are not really sure how to answer the question. They have not thought it through theologically. They would say, "Well, I am Orthodox. My whole country is Orthodox. I may not be the best person, but I do believe I will go to heaven." Or, "My family is fourth generation Methodist. I grew up in the church. I think I am okay." (2) The second group of people senses that there must be more to it than just belonging to church or an ethnic group. You have to be at least a little religious. One might say, "I am not a nun or priest or anything, but I was baptized, and I was confirmed, and I go to church and confession on important occasions, so, I am pretty sure I am going to heaven. Who can really be sure? But I think I am in." Another might say, "I read my Bible and pray every morning. I only listen to Christian radio. And I go to church twice a week." That's the religious answer. I will get in because I do religious things. (3) The third person senses that there must be even more to it than religious ritual. You must actually try to be a good person, give to the poor, take marriage seriously, be honest in business practice, act kindly, and promote justice. Often the response I get is a mix between the options number 2 and 3; a mix between religious and moral behavior. "I have never killed anyone," which, by the way, is a really low bar. I have never killed anyone. Yeah, good for you. "I try to do what is right, to be honest, I go to church, I believe in Jesus, I pray."

Some mix of those three options is what you usually get from a modern religious person. Paul is not addressing a modern religious person. Paul is addressing a first century Jew. So, to interpret Paul correctly we need to think about what is the Jewish perspective that he was addressing? Though we should probably say perspectives. I imagine there were also various options, moving from a less religious Jew to a more religious Jew or from a Pharisees to a Sadducees to a scribe. There was certainly some mix of perspective in first century Judaism.

We do know that the question of who enters the kingdom of God was a common question under discussion for religious Jews in the first century. So, when Jesus raised the issue with Nicodemus in John 3:3, regarding who gets into the kingdom of heaven, he raised an issue of common debate. Nicodemus already knew the answer to the question. The accepted answer of who gets into the kingdom of God was the righteous man. Everybody pretty much knew that. The real debate was over the clarifying question, "Who is righteous?" Jesus, however, threw Nicodemus for a loop when he skipped over the definition of the righteous man and instead proclaimed that the one who is born again is the one who will enter the kingdom of heaven. That was a pretty strange answer to a common Jewish question. So strange that Nicodemus got flustered, was unable to make sense of the conversation, and pretty quickly just stopped talking.

To understand the common Jewish perspective, it is helpful to imagine three concentric circles, one inside the other. The biggest circle, or the outer circle, would define the righteous man as the Jew. If you are a Jew you are in, if you are a Gentile you are out. This fits for the less religious, less moral

person, your averaging working guy. You do not have to over think your relationship with God. If you are born a Jew, then you are part of the people of God. That makes you righteous. You are okay.



Many Jews in Paul's day would reject that idea. They would say there has to be more to it than that. Not only do you have to be Jewish, you also have to obey the ritual law. You have to watch what you eat, keep the Sabbath and circumcise your baby boys. As long as you keep the main markers of the law, then you are in. You are considered righteous. This is the middle of our three circles. It is the religious circle.

The Pharisees were a good example of a third Jewish perspective, which reasoned, "Yes, the first two circles are necessary. You need to be a Jew, you need to keep the covenant rituals, but you need to go further than that. You need to live a moral life. You need to follow the ten commandments, in fact, you need to follow the whole of the law." The righteous man is the one who keeps not only ritual law, but also moral law. How righteous do you have to be in your behavior? In John's account, Jesus did not use the language of righteousness with Nicodemus, but Jesus did use righteousness language throughout the sermon on the mount in Matthew 5-7, notably in Matthew 5:6 when he said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." Jesus affirms that this is a good question to be asking. If the righteous enter the kingdom of God, and you are seeking to enter the kingdom of God, then you should hunger and thirst after righteousness. But Jesus holds up a really high standard for righteousness. In Matthew 5:20 he says, "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven." That would have shocked Nicodemus. Your righteousness must be more moral than the most moral among you.

The three circles that give us the first century Jewish perspective, line up pretty well with modern religious perspectives. The less demanding outer circle simply says that you need to belong to the right group. As long as you are Roman Catholic or Orthodox, Moravian or Methodist, Baptist or Brethren. If you are in the right church, you are good. That's the main thing. The next circle asserts, "No, there must be more to it than that. You need to take being a Methodist seriously, you need to attend church regularly. Or as a Catholic, you need to take mass more than twice a year. Or as a Baptist you need adult baptism and need to read your Bible daily." This middle circle says that doing the right religious rituals or habits or disciplines puts you in right standing with God. The final circle goes further, "No, being a member of the right group is not enough and doing the right religious activities is not enough, you actually have to live a moral life."

Paul forced us into that third central circle in Romans 2:1-16. If you are going to stand in judgment of immoral, secular people, then you must meet the moral requirements yourself. Paul concluded, however, that no one does meet the moral standard required by God. On the day of judgment our

thoughts will alternately defend and accuse. If we take the moral defense in the court of God, we will lose our case. We are guaranteed a guilty verdict.

The natural move is to fall back on the second middle circle, the religious circle. We all know that we are not basically good, if we are able to rationally think about it. We are sometimes good. We are often selfish, rude, judgmental, prideful, uncaring, lustful, and greedy. When we own up to our own moral failures, religious ritual provides a first line of defense. If the moral defense fails, what about the religious defense. "I may not be perfect, but surely, God takes into account my religious actions." That's the question before Paul. Will my religious ritual and disciplines cover over my moral failure? Paul is going to say, "No."

Romans 2:17-29 has two main sections. In 17-23 Paul sets up the charge, telling the religious Jew that that their knowledge of God's will has led to a false sense of security undermined by their behavior. Then in 24-29 Paul brings home his charge that religious behavior and ritual do not make up for moral failure.

I. Knowledge of God's will lead the religious person to a false sense of security undermined by sin (2:17-23).

Paul goes after the religious person's security with three lists, coming in quick succession. The first two list are positive. The third is not. Listening, we get the feel of a prosecuting attorney on the attack. I will read all three and then come back to each one in turn.

[Read Romans 2:17-23]

A. The religious person becomes confident in their position with God because of their knowledge of the Bible (2:17-18).

The Law here refers to Torah. It is the Pentateuch or first five books of the Bible. This is the set of books that Moses left with the second generation of Israelites out of Egypt. It is much more than a list of dos and don'ts. It includes history, poetry, theological explanation. And it answers for the early Jewish nation three essential questions, "Who is God?" "Who am I?" "What's our mission?"

This first list identifies truths about the believer in God who has received the special revelation of his word. Through God's covenant they have the special identity of "Jew." They know who they are. They know the good and bad of their history. They are also able to "rely on the Law." They have a sense of purpose from the Law directing them how to live individually, how to live in community, how to order their religious life and even how to order their civil society. They can also "boast in God" which again goes to identity. They are connected to someone much greater than they are alone on their own. And they "know his will." Their God is not a fickle, chaotic pagan god whose will is undiscernible. In the Law, God made his will known. They know what he expects. "They can approve the things that are essential" for relationship with God and for life in family and community.

The special revelation of God in his Word enables the Jews a to see things as God sees them. They have access to an accurate worldview. They are wonderfully blessed in their religion.

In our new covenant age, Paul's argument can be updated by inserting Christian for Jew and Bible for Law. It still works.

[Reread Romans 2:17-18, replacing Christian for Jew and Bible for Law.]

Paul's argument through the whole passage applies to the people of God who have received the Word of God.

B. The religious person's confidence emboldens them to teach others the worldview they have received in the Bible (2:19-20).

The next list of five items in verse 19-20 describes the religious person's advantage over the non-religious person. Again, this is not a negative list. All these things should be true of someone who truly knows God and has access to his word. Because they accepted God's revelation, the Jews had a superior worldview. The pagan nations surrounding Israel lacked insight into God's character, into

the value of human beings, into accurate moral definition of what is good and what is evil, into the orderliness of the created world, the nature of history and time, the reality of the soul and of the afterlife. The Christian has the same advantage in the Bible, even a greater advantage, since we now have the revelation concerning Jesus Christ. The world makes the most sense when Jesus is at the center of our worldview and when we trust the Bible to fill out the details. Of course, we may not understand the Bible accurately. But pursuit of accurate understanding leads us to more accurate understanding of how life works, spiritually, morally, relationally. Paul would not have us apologize for the blessing of the Bible, and he would certainly approve of the responsibility believers have in communicating biblical truth to a world that is without hope, separated from God.

At the same time, Paul is quite aware of the sinful heart's tendency to turn religious knowledge into a sense of superiority, and even worse, into hypocritical superiority. After these two positive lists, Paul's charge comes in the next list.

C. Yet, the religious person does not live out the moral vision received in the Bible (2:21-23).

[Read Romans 2:21-23]

The problem is not the possession of religious knowledge. The problem is thinking that the possession of religious knowledge is somehow enough to earn God's approval, when we know our behavior does not match up to our teaching.

It is not clear why Paul uses the examples of stealing, adultery, and robbing temples. Stealing and adultery both bring to mind the ten commandments, such that we should probably feel free to add in the whole list of ten; the two examples implying the whole. We should also keep in mind that the ten commandments provide a moral continuum. Jews understood the ten commandments as a general summary of the whole law of Moses. Every specific law was somehow captured by one of the ten. If that is true, then we need to understand murder and stealing and adultery more broadly.

Jesus taught a broader view of the ten commandments in Matthew 5. Jesus taught that if we call someone a fool, we commit murder (Matthew 5:22). Murder is the supreme negative behavior forbidden by the commandment. To murder someone is to distain their life to such a degree that you are willing to take their life to fulfill your own agenda. If the actual taking of life is at the far end of the continuum of murder, then hateful thoughts, hateful words and deeds make up the continuum leading to murder. To hate a person in my heart, to degrade a person with my words, to spit on, hit or scratch another person. These are the sins of murder.

For the case of adultery, Jesus says that lust for a woman that is not your wife is the sin of adultery (Matthew 5:28). It starts in the mind, then moves to words and actions before being fully consummated in sexual intercourse. The example here of stealing is interesting, because it is the one example in the ten commandments where the outward action and the internal formulation of the sin are both included. The outward action is forbidden in the commandment "Do not steal." The inner sin is forbidden in the commandment "Do not covet." Coveting starts in the mind and moves toward the outward action of stealing.

So, even though Paul uses the more concrete behaviors of stealing and adultery, his argument includes coveting and lusting. Who are you to teach others to be faithful in marriage when you do not resist the lusting in your own mind or when you are watching internet pornography? And who are you to teach others not to steal when your heart is full of jealousy for what you do not have?

I have to admit that I am not sure what Paul is talking about when he says, "You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?" One thought would be that he is addressing those who speak out against idol worship, but do not pay their own tithe for the upkeep of the temple. The problem with that interpretation is that Paul uses the plural for temple, and the Jews only had one temple. Another possibility is that Jews in Rome received some kind of benefit from pagan temples, such that with their mouths they spoke of the evil of the temples and with their hands they took their share in the

benefit offered by pagan temples. Or maybe some really robed temples. Whichever it is, Paul had in mind some hypocritical practice that the Romans would have understood.

Paul's conclusion comes out quite clear. Confident in their religious knowledge, Paul charges religious Jew with bringing dishonor on God by not living up to their own teaching.

II. Indictment: Religious knowledge and ritual do not make up for failure in moral practice (2:24-29).

This brings us into the second section of the text, after we have these three lists. In the rest of the section Paul brings in the central Jewish ritual of circumcision. To sum up Paul's indictment, he declares that religious knowledge and ritual do not make up for failure in moral practice. Paul makes his point here with three consecutive "for" statements. The word "for" may or may not occur in your translation. It is there in the original Greek that Paul used. It is at the beginning of verse 24, 25, and 28. You will hear it in the English translation I am using.

Let's take them one by one.

A. For... (2:24)

[Read Romans 2:24]

Verse 24 supports the statement made in verse 23. This is the basic indictment. In verse 23 Paul asks the rhetorical question, "You who boast in the Law, through your breaking of the Law do you dishonor God?" We could follow that up with the question, "How does our breaking the law dishonor God?" Paul's response is verse 24, "Your breaking the law dishonors God, because 'the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'" When religious people preach one thing and then behave contrary to their teaching, non-religious people take note. And not only does the inconsistency cause them to think badly of the religious people. It also causes them to think badly of the God of those religious people.

Often religious people are guilty of communicating superiority over non-religious people. "We know the truth, we are better." That comes out a lot. At other times, religious people communicate humbly, yet, their claim to special knowledge is still heard or interpreted as a claim to superiority. Either way, non-religious or less religious people are aware that Christians claim to have a special sight into what is morally right and what is morally wrong. They know we preach to not commit adultery. So, what do they think when a famous minister is caught in adultery? They know we preach the Bible is true, and the Bible says to turn the other cheek to the aggressor, do not take your Christian brother to court, care for the widow and orphan, love your neighbor and love the foreigner. When we fail in these areas, we look like hypocrites, and our God looks like a judgmental, abusive, small minded god. A claim to religious knowledge combined with failure in living out the moral claims of that religious knowledge smells awful. One pastor calls it theological body odor. Good truth, bad practice. Its very evident to the non-religious person, and it brings dishonor on the God that the religious person claims to follow.

B. For... (2:25-27)

The next "for" introduces the point made in verses 25-27. Paul refers to circumcision in this point. Circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic covenant instituted in Genesis 17. The Mosaic covenant, building on the Abrahamic covenant, continued the requirement of circumcision. Circumcision provided a physical marker for Jewish boys and men that distinguished them or set them apart from non-Jews.

Paul has said in verse 24 that the behavior of the Jewish people has caused non-Jewish people to talk bad about the God of the Jews. We might again ask Paul, "How so?" "How is it that inability to live up to our teaching causes non-Jews to blaspheme God." To summarize Paul's point in 25-27, he is going to say, "Your failure to live out your own teaching causes non-Jews to speak badly about God because you have set yourself apart by your religious ritual, but not by your behavior, such that you act like you are not the people of God while non-Jews who are not set apart by the religious ceremony of circumcision at times fulfill the teaching of God."

[Read Romans 2:25-27]

Paul has refused to accept the religious defense. It is not enough to be circumcised. You actually have to obey the law. He has maneuvered us back to the moral argument. The religious defense wants to argue that possession of religious knowledge, the Law, and performance of religious ritual somehow make up for our moral failures. Paul says, "No, they do not." Those who have not been ritually circumcised sometimes do better at fulfilling the law than you who have been circumcised. Though the Jewish person feels like they are a guide to the blind in verse 19, here it is the non-Jewish person who judges the Jewish person. The teacher is not the one who knows the right thing to do. The teacher is the one who does the right thing.

Jews and Christians often make the same mistake in understanding the religious rituals of the Bible. We have circumcision, food laws and various commands to sacrifice in the Old Testament. In the New Testament the two big rituals are baptism and the Lord's supper, taking the bread and wine. The mistake is to believe that somehow these rituals cover over our moral sin.

There is a popular perspective or way to look at it that God judges based on the scale system. All our sins are put on one side of the scale and all our good works on the other side of the scale. Whichever way the scale tips decides the judgement. The moral indictment from the beginning of the chapter ensures us that the scale will always tilt towards guilty. Our sin always outweighs our good works, because God takes into account thoughts and words as well as actions. This is the point in the argument where the religious person takes a step back from trying to make their defense purely on their moral behavior. They want to add their religious knowledge, rituals, and habits onto the good side of the scale. "But I was baptized. I went to church and took communion weekly. I prayed daily. I gave a full 10% of my income. That has got to count for something. If I put all that on to the good side of the scale won't it tip it over in my favor?"

There are at least three problems with this line of thinking.

First, even if religious ritual did tip the scales, are you truly doing those things out of love for God or are you simply trying to buy your way out of sin? If your heart is not pure in your ritual, then the action is not pleasing to God? Does it really go on the good side, if you are only doing it to try to get out of sin? As David prays in the confession of his sin in Psalm 53:16, "God, you do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; you are not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." David understood that the religious ritual does not have value if the heart is not right.

Second, God does not judge us on this scale system. No judge does that. You may be given some credit for good behavior before a court of law, being a descent guy is not going to get you off for murder. You will be judged before the court based on your moral thoughts, words, and deeds, one at a time. Each sin you commit is a grievous offense against the moral nature of God. Paul is going to say in Romans 6:23 that "the wages of sin is death." The penalty for one sin is death or eternal separation from God. Holy God cannot be in relationship with sinful man. He must judge sin. If we put on one side of the scale all the truly good and selfless, loving acts you have done in your life and put on the other side of the scale one sin. The verdict of a just judge must still be guilty for that one sin. You are guilty of that one sin. Adding all your religious knowledge and action on the good side does not change the fact that you must pay the penalty of that one sin.

Third, the Bible does not teach that the penalty of sin is good community service. If the offence were lighter, then perhaps the penalty would be to say three prayers and go to church for a month. Though it is truly a shame if you feel like talking to God in prayer and going to church are penalties. But the offence is not light. The offence tarnishes the image of God in which you were made. The offence disqualifies you for relationship with a holy God. The result is eternal separation from God. The penalty of sin is death. You do not pay that with your good religious behavior.

We will come back to this understanding of judgment when we get to the verdict at the end of chapter 3. For now, it is enough to know that Paul does not accept religious ritual as efficacious for removing the guilt of sin.

C. For... (2:28-29)

We can ask, “How so?”, one more time. How is it that the ritual of circumcision does protect us from our moral failures? Paul’s answer has to do with the function of circumcision. Circumcision was not intended as a ritual act that somehow conferred grace on a Jewish boy. If that were the case, we should truly fear for the salvation of all the Jewish girls. Circumcision was a symbolic ritual pointing towards an internal reality. Circumcision symbolized both a curse and a blessing. Through the ritual of circumcision parents declared a curse on their own seed or their own descendants, essentially declaring, “If we do not walk faithfully with God, if we turn away to worship other Gods then let our descendants be cut off from the people of Israel (Genesis 17:9-14).” The symbolic idea is a cutting off. Circumcision also communicates a blessing, symbolizing the need for God to work internally in the heart of a person, so that they might be able to love him and serve him. Circumcision of the heart is a cutting away of the old flesh or sin nature. Moses promised in Deuteronomy 30:6, “The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live.” Now let’s read the text.

[Read Romans 2:28-29]

Trusting in circumcision to make oneself acceptable before God is to miss the whole point of the ritual. Circumcision is meant to call Jews to commit to faithful service with God that comes out of a heart for God. Circumcision does not make up for moral failure.

Paul’s example here is the Jew. The same argument applies to all cultural Christians. We could insert baptism for circumcision. Baptism carries into the new covenant very similar symbolism as circumcision. There is both a curse and a blessing. Recognizing the need to die for sin, baptism takes the Christian under the water, symbolizing death. That’s the curse. And recognizing the need for God to do an internal work in the heart, baptism takes the Christian up out of the water, symbolizing new life. That’s the blessing. Baptism does not make up for moral failure. Baptism points to an internal reality. The religious Christian who trusts in their knowledge of the Bible and their various religious practices fails in their defense before God, just as much as the Jewish person.

Who is righteous before God? Going back to our three circles, the outer circle says it is enough to simply be a member; be a Jew or be a Christian in the right denomination. That’s it. You are in. But certainly, there has to be more than that. You have to be religious; be baptized, take the Lord’s supper, go to church. Others say, that is not enough. You have to go further. You have to keep the moral law. The righteous one is both religious and moral. Paul agrees. But he also agrees with Jesus. Your morality must exceed the morality of the most moral among you. You must be without guilt. How that can be Paul has not yet told us. We must wait a bit more. He hints in verse 29 that he is going to talk about something new. A work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. But he is not ready to go into that now.

Paul’s last words challenge us to a right perspective. In verse 17 the religious person is described as boasting in God. He is secure in his own knowledge about God. A dangerous reality in the sinful human heart when mixed with religion, even good religion, is that we become self-satisfied with our own religious knowledge and practice. The human heart is terribly legalistic. We feel as though we know God and are good with God because of our status as a member of the right group and because of the paltry commitments we make in the name of religion. The legalistic human heart also craves the praise of others. “See what I have done. Recognize that I am worthy.” Praise from man strengthens our sense of security in our own righteousness. It is wonderful to gather around us people of like mind, people who approve of our religious ritual, because they convince us that we are okay.

But the person who truly seeks God and truly loves God, is not proud in his own knowledge and behavior and he does not depend on the praise of other people. As Paul writes in our last verse here, “But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.” “His praise is not from men, but from God.” You see, it is not so important what you think about God as what God thinks about you. It is crucial to hear God say, “Justified. You are innocent before my court. Enter into relationship with me.” False security in religious works hinders the pursuit of open and honest relationship with God. As David said, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

Before we find the answer to the question, “What makes me right in the eyes of God?” We must desire the answer. When we recognize that we are indeed poor in Spirit, when we mourn over our sin, when we become meek before God, when we begin to hunger and thirst after his righteousness, then we are on the right path. Then we are no longer seeking man’s answer to how to be right before God, but we have begun to seek God’s answer. We see that we have no answer in and of ourselves. We seek God’s answer. And those who seek will find.

Reflection questions

1. As you observe the text of Romans 2:17-29, what are a couple of things that stand out to you as strange or interesting or confusing or important?
2. What stands out to you as interesting or important or surprising in the first two of Paul’s lists in 2:17-20?
3. What are one or two examples of the biblical worldview that your culture needs to understand? In other words, what message from the Bible would be helpful at this point in time for your society to hear?
4. What are one or two examples in your society of the how the behavior of Christians prevents the positive message of the Bible from being heard? In other words, what examples come to mind of how the words or attitudes of Christians undermine their own teaching?
5. In your church or circle of Christian friends, what are some of the expected rituals, disciplines or behaviors?
6. Take an example or two from question 5 and answer the following question. How do you understand the purpose of that particular religious ritual or discipline? Why is it important?
7. What does it mean to claim from verse 29 “It is more important what God thinks about you than what you think about God”?