

Romans: The Jew's Confidence Empty

Romans 2:17-20

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans, chapter 2, verse 17. We've been working through Paul's letter for a number of weeks now. Ever since Romans 1:18 we have been emphasizing that Paul's point throughout this long passage that runs all the way to Romans 3:20 is to explain why we need the gospel. He is pre-empting the expected response of some who say to Paul, "Well, Paul, that's nice and all, but I don't need your gospel." Paul is explaining in this whole section why everybody needs the gospel. He started in Romans, chapter 1 with the Gentiles. But in Romans, chapter 2, verse 1, he turned right to his own brethren, right to the most religious people in the world in his time, right to the very people who had received God's revelation of Himself, and His law through Moses to the Jewish people. And he begins to speak to them and showing them that they, too, need the gospel, because he knows that they are tempted precisely because of the privileges that they've received, to think that they do not stand in need of saving grace, even as the Gentiles do. But his point to them consistently is the very greatness of your privileges brings along with it a greater judgment if you do not embrace the promises of God. And at the very center of the promises of God are the coming Messiah who comes to save his people from their sins by His own death on their behalf. That must be embraced for salvation to be experienced. And so Paul continues to pile up arguments to break down any resistance to the reality of everyone's need of the gospel of grace.

Let's turn to God's word then in Romans, chapter 2 and hear it. Let me just say in passing that this word is the first half of an argument, and so it will sound like an incomplete sentence that we're reading. And it will sound that way because it is. The second half of the argument comes next week, but you'll see why we are focusing on this in a few moments:

"But if you bear the name Jew and rely upon the law, and boast in God and know His will, and approve the things that are essential being instructed out of the law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth. You, therefore, who teach

another do you not teach yourself?"

Thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we thank You for this world, and we ask now that You would cause us to search us to search our own hearts out; that we would seek to hear what Your word has to say to us more than what it might have to say to someone else. We pray that we would be convicted, corrected, built up and encouraged by Your word. That by Your Spirit You would apply Your word just in those places where we need it most. We pray that we would be hearers and doers of Your truth. For these things we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

The apostle Paul in these few little verses before us is rooting around in the inventory of our lives to find all the things other than Christ and the gospel on which we are relying to stand us with approval before God. He knows that we will run in every direction we can find to justify ourselves, to convince ourselves in our own mind that we are all right from God apart from Christ in His gospel if we are given half the opportunity. And so he is exploring every possible area that we might, as religious people, be tempted to run for refuge rather than in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is recounting for us in these verses a religious person's self-perception. A person who perceives himself to be 'okay' with God, but in fact that self-perception is a delusion. This person is in spiritual and moral denial. He and she think that they are alright with God, but in fact they are not. Paul knows that our self-perception is sometimes self-deception, and he is writing here to uncover self-deception.

First, he comments in verses 17 and 18 on how his fellow Jews predominantly see themselves in relationship to God. And then in verses 19 and 20 he comments on how they see themselves in relation to others, especially the Gentiles. And by pointing to these self-perceptions, he uncovers self-deceptions and thus strips away objections to the gospel itself. So let's hear what Paul has to say to us in these two parts today.

I. The truth misused blinds us to the truth.

First, if I may direct your attention to verses 17 and 18. Paul, in those verses, describes for us how the Jew thinks about himself in relation to God and to the things of God, and he says four things. He says that the Jew thinks, "I am specially chosen by God; I uniquely delight in Him; I know His will; and I am possessed of good, spiritual discernment." And the Jew says this in contrast to the prevailing irreligion of the Gentiles around him. But as Paul reveals to us that self-perception of the predominant number of his people in his own time, he is also telling us something else. He's telling us that the truth misused blinds us to the truth. His own people have had the truth given to them from the mouth of

Moses and the prophets. It's God's truth. Paul doesn't quibble with that. They have had enormous privileges given to them. Paul doesn't quibble with that or deny that. But he says that they have misused those things that God has given to them, and, therefore, are blinding themselves to the truth and its purpose. And that's a truth, that's a reality that's just as significant for us. If we misuse the truth, it blinds us to the purpose of the truth. The apostle begins this section with an enumeration of those things which the typical Jew of his day prided himself in, and which he thought gave him superiority over the Gentiles and commended him to God. And he identifies four things as we've already said. Let's work through them.

In verse 17, first he says, you take confidence in the fact that you are the Jew. You are a Jew. He says, "You bear the name Jew." Ever since the time of II Kings, the name Jew had been used to refer to the totality of the people of God. There are all sorts of arguments about where that term came from. Many suspect that it came from the tribe of Judah, which was the last identifiable homogeneous tribe in the time of the dispersion of Israel, but that name came to indicate all the uniqueness of the relationship between this ethnic people and the one true God.

And Paul is saying, you take pride, you take confidence in the fact that you have this unique relationship with God that God has chosen you. That God has elected you. And Paul is raising here the problem of the misapplication of the doctrine of God's national election of Israel. The people of Israel say to Paul. "Well, Paul, your gospel is nice and such, but we're the chosen people of God. God has chosen us out of all the nations of the earth. We don't need your gospel, thank you very much. God has chosen us. We are His people." And the apostle Paul is saying, "Look, that is a misapplication of the doctrine of divine election."

And Paul in this book of Romans places at least two arguments against that misapplication of the doctrine of divine elections. First of all, he says, "Look if you're truly elected, you are also transformed." So if you say that you're the elect of God, if you say you are chosen of God, and God has not transformed your life; if you have not become a doer of the law as well as a hearer of the law, then you're not elect. In other words, he points to the proper results and effects of election, and he says, "If those things aren't there, you may be deluded." If you don't have a transformed life accompanying this claim of a special relationship with God, that is a good sign that something is grossly out of order.

Secondly, and he does this especially in Romans, chapter 9 through chapter 11. The apostle Paul says, "Alongside of the truth of your national election as a people, you need to recognize that there is another truth just as important, and that is the doctrine of the individual election of God." And so he quotes for the Jewish people in Romans 9 through 11. You remember, "Jacob have I loved, and Esau have I hated." He points to two Jews. Two true sons of Abraham, and one is chosen, and one is not. One is God's people and one is not. And one is blessed and one is cursed. And, he does that precisely so that Israel will not

presume upon this special favor and election which God has certainly bestowed upon them as a nation.

But you see Paul's words to his Jewish people in his own time, are just as much applicable to us today. For we ourselves have received great favor in the teaching of God's word, inheriting the faith from our parents, hearing His word read and taught and preached. And it would be possible for us to rest in those privileges without experiencing the realities to which those privileges point. And it would be possible for us to become proud in this benevolent bequest that God has given to us. But Paul is saying, "That's a contradiction in terms. It's a contradiction," Paul says, "to be proud of your election. You have nothing to your account to credit for your election." Even Moses in Deuteronomy, chapter 7, had said to the people of God "You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you, and I have chosen you not because you were the greatest of the people, but in fact you were the least of them. I have chosen you because I love you." In other words, the reason, the origin, the source of God's choosing of God's people is not to be found in them, anything that they've done, anything that they are, but it's to be found in His mercy.

And the same is true today. You can be proud, or you can be a Presbyterian, but you can't be both. How can you be proud of being saved by the grace of God? How can you be proud of having been chosen on the basis of the mercy of God and the merits of the Lord Jesus Christ and none of your own? What is there to be proud about that. That's a humbling thing. It humbles you in the dust to realize that for some reason God in His mercy has taken you and He's saved you, despite yourself, and He's brought you into His kingdom. That's the most humbling experience in the world. And that's why Isaac Watts can ask in his great hymn, *How Sweet and Awesome is the Place*, Lord, why was I a guest? Why was I invited to your banquet? I have nothing to commend myself to You. I can point to many men more moral than me, more deserving than me. And yet, you've chosen me in Your mercy. That's a humbling thing. It humbles you to the dust. And Paul is saying that the people of his own day, his own people, the Jewish people, had contorted, they had twisted that doctrine. They turned it on his head; and they had become prideful, when they should have been humble.

Secondly, notice what he says again in verse 17. You take confidence in your possession of the law, in your obedience of it. Notice his words, "You rely upon the law." Paul again, is responding to something that he hears from the Jewish people all the time. "Paul, you don't understand. We don't need your gospel. We have the law." And the apostle doesn't say, "No, you don't." And he doesn't say, "Well, that doesn't matter." What he says is this: "Fine. You have the law. Do you do it? Fine, you have the law. Do you understand it?" See Paul's Jewish people, his friends are saying to him, "Paul, we have the law. Of all the people in the world, we have been given the law of God." That was absolutely true.

But Paul is pointing out here the problem of misunderstanding the function of the

law, and its comprehensive demands. Sure, they had the self-revelation of God. Sure, they had the way of righteousness displayed before them, and yet they had not realized just how comprehensive were the demands of the law. And they had not realized that the law in fact condemned them, if they were not walking in according to it. And so Paul's remedy is to emphasize to them the demands of the law and the extent of the law. The law was far more comprehensive than they had ever thought before. It extended even to the motions and the attitudes of the heart. The demands of the law were strict and exacting; and, in fact, apart from God's grace, the law would condemn us. And he points to two realities that they were ignoring. The second use of the law, and the third use of the law. Yes, it is true, that the third use of the law is as a pattern for righteousness. But it is also true that the law drives us to Christ, so though we want to say with the psalmist, 'How I love Your law, O Lord,' even as we say that we realize that apart from Christ, the law would condemn us. And, therefore, the law always leads us right back to the mercy of God and the Savior. And if you forget either of those realities about the law, you become precisely what had happened to the people of God in Paul's day. You become immune to your sense of need of grace.

Then in verse 18 he goes on to say a third thing. "You are proud of your God." That's an interesting thing. "You boast in your God," he says. "Now what that's all about?" Let's think back to the scripture reading that we heard a little bit earlier this morning. It's Isaiah 21, it speaks of the judgment of against the people of Israel's great enemy, Babylon. Though Babylon may indeed run ragged over Israel from time to time, though Babylon may dominate the people of Israel, Isaiah 21 speaks of the day when God will bring judgment against Babylon. And you can see a pious Jew standing around and saying I thank God that you have conquered this wicked nation, Babylon, with her false Gods. And I glory in the fact that I worship the one true God, not some idol that has been invented by the hands of men that these poor people, these pagans in Babylon worship. And you can understand there's a true distinction there, isn't it? Between the glory of the one true God, and the idols of men's imaginations.

And yet the apostle Paul reminds us here that there's a problem. There's a problem of separating the knowledge of the one true God from God Himself. One can glory in ideas, in truth about the one true God without glorying in the one true God Himself. One can know a great deal about the one true God without knowing the one true God Himself. One can think a lot about the one true God without fellowshiping and having a saving, personal relationship with the one true God. And so the apostle Paul says to the Jewish people, "Yes, you boast in your God, but you don't know much about Him. You haven't seen him in all the glory of his character. And you've thought a lot about Him, but you haven't known Him." And so the apostle Paul to remedy this reminds us that the knowledge of God, and God Himself can never be separated. We can't say, with so many people today, well, I just want to have a relationship with God who cares about theology, who cares about the Bible. Well, I'll tell you who cares about it. God's people do, because that Bible, that theology is God's revelation of Himself to them, and they

won't know Him apart from that revelation of Himself to them. But, on the other hand, if we simply become obsessed with the facts revealed about God, and we do not realize that the word that God has given us in His word about Himself is precisely so that we would fellowship with Him, and experience Him as He is and as He is towards us in His benefits, then we have misused the theology that He's provided us. Anytime we separate the knowledge of God, from God Himself, we will go awry. And so the apostle Paul accuses His own people in His own day of knowing a lot about God, but not knowing God. They've fallen in love with their ideas about God, but not with the living God himself.

And then fourthly, in verse 18, he says, "You take confidence in your spiritual and moral discernment." This is the longest phrase of all. Look what he says: "You know His will, and approve the things that are essential being instructed out of the law." "They said look Paul, we don't need your gospel. We know the will of God. He's revealed it to us in word, and in His law. We're able to distinguish those things which are more significant and less significant; those things which are right and those things which are wrong, unlike these poor Gentiles. Go tell the Gentiles about your gospel. Maybe they need to hear it; but we certainly don't need to hear it, we already know these things."

And the apostle Paul turns back on them the problem of the speck and the log. The problem that they are very quick to see the sins and the foibles of the Gentiles, and they are very slow to see their own failure. They may know a lot, but they don't do a lot. So he turns back on them the problem of the speck and the log about which Jesus had spoken in His teaching. And he turns back on them the problem of hearing and doing that they've heard the law. That they may know something about the law, but they haven't done the law. And he says to them, "It is not enough to admire the law. We must embrace it in our desires. We must do it. We must live it. So don't claim that you're immune from the judgment of God because you know the law when you don't do it." Don't claim that you're immune from the judgment of God when you judge others according to that law, but don't do it yourselves.

So the apostle Paul is reminding us today that it's not enough to admire the rectitude of God's law. It's not enough to criticize those who don't obey the statutes of His law. We must embrace it with our own desires. We must live by it, we must judge ourselves harshly, and others charitably in light of the law. Paul is bringing to bear all these things in his discussion with the Jews to show them how they have misused the truth and thus blinded themselves to the truth.

And I want you to note that Paul's criticism of these people is very different than a modern liberal's criticism would have been of them. If a modern liberal had come to critique the Jews of Paul's day, it probably would have gone something like this: "How can you be so arrogant to believe in a doctrine like election?" That's not true. God doesn't elect. And then they would have gone on to say something like, "And what is all this fooling around with the law? You don't need

the law. Law isn't for Christians. That's an Old Testament thing." And then he would have gone to say something like this, "Theology, smeeology. Who needs theology? You guys are sitting around thinking about abstract stuff all the time. Stop thinking about that. That's not important." And then they would have come along and said something like, "And what is this imposing your own moral standards on others? Let people just live however they want. I'm okay, you're okay." That would have been the modern liberals critique of the people of God in Paul's day.

That is not Paul's criticism of them. Notice that Paul says none of that to them. These are conservative, Bible believing religious people who are very serious about a relationship with God. And he says none of that. Notice, if Paul ever had an opportunity to deny the doctrine of election, this is it. He could have said, "You guys were never elected. God doesn't elect." He says, "Sure, sure, the doctrine of God's election is true. You've misused it." If Paul ever had the opportunity to throw out the law, this was his chance. But notice he doesn't jettison the law. He doesn't say, "You know, your problem is you're hung up on all this law stuff. If you'd just get rid of the law and get into grace, everything would be great." That's not what he says. He doesn't jettison. He says, "You know, in fact, the problem is you haven't understood the law enough." Notice again thirdly. He doesn't trash theology. He doesn't say, "You know you guys, you're pretty cocky about all this thinking you do about God." He doesn't do that. He just says, "You have misused the truth. You need to think about the truth. You ought to glory in the truth. You ought to glory in God. Your problem is not that you do too much. The problem is that you don't do it enough. In fact, you don't do it at all. You're in love with an idea, but not the one true God." And finally, he doesn't attack them for imposing their moral standards on others, because after all it's not their moral standards. But what he does say is this. "You're very quick to judge other people for not living up to these moral standards, but you're very slow to see how you don't live up to them. So be uniform in your criticism. In fact, concentrate on your own hearts instead of others and especially the Gentiles. The apostle Paul's critique is entirely different than a modern religious liberal's critique would have been of the religion of his day. And we need to look closely to what Paul is saying because it is directly relevant to us.

II. Theology gone bad inoculates us against the saving truth of God and leads us to sin against our neighbor.

And then in verses 19 and 20 he goes on. He's been speaking about the perception that the Jewish person has of his relationship with God. Now he speaks of his perception of how he relates to the Gentiles. And again in verses 19 and 20 he says, "The Jew thinks I'm a guide for spiritually blind Gentiles. I'm a light for those in darkness. I'm an instructor of the ignorant. I am a teacher of those who are mature." Again, four things he says about the Jew's self-perception of the way he relates to those who are apart from the revelation of

God to Moses. And again, we see in this passage that theology gone bad inoculates us against the saving truth of God, and it leads us to sin against our neighbor. It not only keeps us from hearing the gospel, but it leads us to have an attitude of inappropriate pride and superiority to our neighbor. We don't serve our neighbor, we don't love our neighbor. We lord it over our neighbor, and we think that we are a lot better than our neighbor.

And the apostle goes through several things here. Having dealt with the Jewish misappropriation and misunderstanding of the truth in relation to God, he now considers its effect on neighbor love. And he says four things. "You're convinced that you are a guide for the Gentiles who are blind. And of course this is a warping of something that they were genuinely. This was a responsibility that God had given them. God had given to the Jewish people the responsibility of being a guide for those who are blind." Furthermore, he says, "You are convinced that you live in light, while the Gentiles live in darkness." Well, indeed, the people of God had been called to be a great light in the middle of darkness. They were to be a light to the Gentiles. God had called them to be a blessing to the Gentiles. But what is Paul saying here? A responsibility that they have been given by God has been contorted by them into an occasion to be prideful. And instead of seeing their responsibility, their obligation of mission to the Gentiles, they have instead become spiritually fat and lazy and prideful.

And he goes on. "You are convinced that you are capable of and called to tutoring those in the foolish ways of God. You're convinced that you are well-equipped to instruct new converts in the way of life." These people view themselves as having arrived. Spiritually and morally they are a cut above everyone else. They are here to instruct everybody else. And yet they don't see the holes in their own life. And so the apostle Paul responds to this. And he says two or three things. He says, "First of all, spiritual pride has hampered your God-given mission. It's not that God didn't call you to be a light to the Gentiles, it's that you have taken that as an occasion of pride. As if somehow you were inherently better than they were instead of simply saved by God's grace. And so instead of serving them and longing for the Gentiles to fellowship in the truth of God's covenant promises, you have lauded over them and thought them better than them."

Secondly, he says, "There is actually an unconscious ignorance of God's person and His law right here amongst the very people who tend to think of themselves as so wise. And that unconscious ignorance of God's law and God's person, has blinded you to your own blindness and need. You think you know God better than everybody else. You think you know His law better than everybody else." And Paul is saying, "You don't really know Him at all, and you really don't know His law. And the fact that you don't know Him, and you don't know His law has blinded you to your need of Him and of His grace. And to the reality of the truth of His law.

And thirdly, Paul goes on to say that, "The focus of His Jewish brethren on other's needs and other's deficiencies, and other's sins has forestalled their own self-examination." They are very quick to see other people's faults, but they are very quick to forgive their own.

And my friends, this is why I want you to see. What Paul is saying is just as applicable to us today as it was to the Jewish people to whom He first spoke. It's very easy for people who have been given tremendous religious privileges in a culture that is decaying by the minute around us. To be quick to criticize – everybody in this room could gather around, and for many hours we could have a heated discussion about the inadequacies of the decisions of the Supreme Court in the last two or three weeks. And we could go away feeling really good about ourselves and the moral stand that we have taken. Quick to point at others, slow to point at our own hearts.

And the apostle Paul is saying this: "This is why you need the gospel. Because when you really look at God, and when you really look at the law, if that's what you're trusting in, you fall short." And so Paul's reason for sharing these criticisms of his own people is not because he hates them. It's because he desires them to come to Christ. He desires them to see their need for the gospel. He desires us to see our need for the gospel.

In a few moments we're going to sing about the love of Christ, our Savior, and we're going to come to the Lord's table. That table reminds us that we are incapable of saving ourselves by our goodness. That table reminds us that it's only the goodness, it's only the obedience, it's only the worthiness, it's only the merits of Christ that saves us. And that table reminds us that we must come to Him in faith and trusting Him alone, and in faith alone receive the grace which is the gospel. That table reminds us of the truth that Paul is preparing us to hear even in this passage. May the Lord bless His word. Let's pray.

Our Heavenly Father, we ask that You would speak to our own hearts this morning. That You would convict us again of sin, and that you would convince us of the meeting of our need in Christ alone. And that we would, by Your grace, and by the work of the Holy Spirit, seek Him by faith so that in Him we might a Savior and a friend. We praise You for His love, and we pray that as we now partake of His sacrament that we would revel in it, knowingly, in Jesus name, we ask it, Amen.

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