

We Are the People!

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[0 : 0 0] I think it's hard to analyze sometimes what we are thinking. Even what we're thinking ourselves spiritually, sometimes maybe by the way we live or by the way that we are proceeding in our lives.

And I think even within the church it's difficult sometimes to assess exactly where we are with respect to Jesus Christ and what we think of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is not good for me. He's good for my mantlepiece. He's good just to have there now and again.

I'm good and religious enough for Him and for me. I am religious enough, and I think I'm religious enough for God, for Jesus Christ.

The redemption, the gospel of being born again is really for others. It's not for me. Well, maybe in word, but I don't really believe that.

[1 : 0 6] I'm not really in need of redemption at that level. And we may, even though we would be horrified to verbalize that, it may be that that is by our lives and by our understanding how we live.

You may be here today and you're not a Christian by your own profession and testimony that you're maybe vaguely interested, or you're here because you've always come here or because you're forced to come here or because you think you ought to be here and earn some favor with God.

There may be a multiplicity of reasons why we're here. But what Paul is doing here in the gospel in Romans chapter 2, as he's being doing up till now, he's very clearly making a case for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He's laying the ground for the gospel of Jesus Christ as he presents it to this church in Rome. And it's absolute truth for us, isn't it? So today in St. Columba's in Edinburgh, at the top of the royal mile, it's just as relevant, it's just as significant for us, because it's absolute truth that affects all of us in our lives.

And what he's doing is he's making a powerful case. He's making the powerful case that every single individual needs redemption. Okay? That's a simple truth, isn't it?

[2 : 2 5] He's making the case that everyone needs redemption, because the church in Rome that he's writing to was kind of divided, as we've seen. So there was non-Jewish people there who'd come to faith in Jesus Christ from pretty radically wild backgrounds.

And there was others who were Jews who had come from very religious backgrounds, and they were divided, and the Jewish people who had the privilege and the knowledge, they were looking down on the others, and they thought there was a kind of level of need, and they felt that they were much better than everyone else.

And this division was possibly led by an individual, as Corrie mentioned last week, or maybe when the U in the singular is used, it's referring to a characteristic representative of the Jewish nation, or the Jewish people like someone might say, you as a Scotsman, but really representing all the Scotsman that there is, or Scots women, or Scots people, or United Kingdom people, or European citizens, whatever it might be, a representative of all of them.

Either way, Paul is expressing that the Jewish people, and possibly the individual himself, is guilty before God as focusing on the personal responsibility.

They were saying, we are the people. That's what we say, isn't it? That's what Scots people say, we are the people. That's what they were saying. That's what they were saying, they were the people, that they were the most, especially they were the people of God, you know?

[3 : 59] And if any people could ever claim to be in God's good books, surely, it was the Jews, it not as we read through the Old Testament, surely they deserve to be treated as special because of who they were.

They were God's chosen people, so they could stand in judgment on those who weren't God's chosen people. They didn't need Christ like other people, like the Gentiles, or like the non-Jews.

They were loud and proud. And it's interesting, I think it's interesting, to consider the ongoing and fascinating and deep-seated reality in our society, as we've seen even in the news this week, of anti-Semitism.

A separate people by design, or by choice, by rejection, or by perception. We still find a uniqueness within their lives and even within the way they are treated and the way sometimes they treat others.

There are two problems here, particularly that's highlighted in this passage with regard to the Jewish people in the church in Rome. Now, don't switch off because you're not a Jew.

[5 : 12] Don't switch off because you think it's an old-fashioned kind of problem, because you'll find that the characteristic personality or characteristic traits are applicable to us all, particularly as church people, because they were church people.

The first one was that they bragged, they boasted about their relationship with God and the law. In verse 17 it says, You, you call yourself a Jew, you're lying, and boast in God.

And then in verse 23 it says the same thing, you who boast in the law, you dishonor God. So they were boasting. They had a bad attitude to who they were.

They were boasting in their ethnic heritage in the fact that they knew all about God, that God had revealed His law to them especially, to no one else, to them especially.

They were educated in the things of God and they were there to teach other people about God. They were called to be a light to the nations, a separate people. And so they boasted about that and they boasted in God.

[6 : 14] That was the first problem. The second problem was they trusted in the outward rituals of their religion. They trusted in the outward rituals of religion. In verse 25 forward is that kind of difficult passage about circumcision.

That Old Testament covenantal sign that they were given to set them apart as God's people. And they were relying on that privilege that they had of being part of the covenant community.

They were content just with the outward badge of belonging to the Jewish nation that was shown in the sign of circumcision. They didn't really think about what it signified, what it meant in their hearts.

And how it was always supposed to be a heart religion of love and of grace. They lost sight of that. So they were relying on their rituals and they were also bragging about their relationship with God.

And there was two outcomes to this. Two outcomes to their bragging and relying on the outward things. The first was that they dishonored God because they didn't teach themselves.

[7 : 22] Verse 21 says that they were people who dishonored God. When you teach about others, you don't teach yourself and so on. And you therefore, verse 23, you boast in the law and dishonor God by breaking the law.

You don't teach what you, you don't teach to yourself what you proudly want to present to others. You're applying it in pride to them, but you're not thinking that you need your heart to be changed.

So it's really, what Paul is highlighting is their abject hypocrisy. Now, listen, people in church, abject hypocrisy.

It's to church people. It's not just people who are struggling with any kind of moral code. This is the most religious of the most religious. And he says, you're abject hypocrites because you're dishonoring me because you're not applying the truth to your own hearts.

You talk about stealing. Are you stealing? You talk about adultery. Are you committing adultery? You talk about robbing temples. Strange thing to say, robbing temples, but apparently it was a big problem.

[8 : 32] It was there to bring in a law to stop it. The Jews were robbing pagan temples to steal the idols, to sell them for money in the name of God.

And it was, they were just breaking God's law all over the place, even in His own name, selling them. They taught, not only did they not teach themselves, that they taught their own version of the law.

That's why Jesus says all the time, and when He's teaching He says, you've heard it said, well, I tell you, He wasn't abandoning the Old Testament. He was putting right there wrong interpretation of the law.

They were doing their own thing, and it didn't reflect well on them. Matthew, Jesus said, Matthew 23 verse 15.

Coming up. Woe to you, scribes and phas, hypocrites. You travel across my, one of my favorite verses of the whole Bible, cross the land to see to make a single proselyte, and when He becomes able, make them twice as much as a child of hell.

[9 : 39] Make them twice as much as you do to yourself. That's gentle Jesus, making mild speaking. He says He makes you twice as much a son of hell as you are. He exposed the hypocrisy of the misrepresentation of the truth that they took, and they bore hellish children.

Miserable, horrible, legalistic, vicious, unloving children. That's what He's saying. And in Matthew 15 verse 14, He says similarly to them, you let them alone, they're blind guides, and if they blind lead, the blind both will fall into a pit.

They were supposed to be the ones who were bringing people, as we saw in these verses, to the light, who were supposed to teach in knowledge and truth, who were supposed to be instructors of the foolish, but they weren't.

They completely lost sight of their calling. They were immature and childish. They weren't wise at all. Sons of hell.

Strong words from Jesus. They dishonored God because they failed to teach themselves. The second thing, the outcome, the second outcome was they caused other people to blaspheme.

[10 : 51] Verse 24 says that, you know, because you break the dishonored God and break the law, the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you. So they were morally weak, you see, and they were idolatrous in reality.

And the world saw them. That quote is taken from Isaiah because the same thing happened in Isaiah when the people of God in the Old Testament turned away and worshiped idols. It caused the people around them to blaspheme and say, you've got a useless God.

You can't even be bothered serving Him. You had a bunch of hypocrites. God's name was blasphemed. The world mocks. The world blasphemes our God because we don't live, and they didn't live according to the redemption that we have been gifted.

And what was happening in effect, and what still often happens today, is that the irreligious, the non-religious, they do God's law outwardly better than the religious who are self-righteous and hypocrites.

So you can go in any street and any pub or any workplace, and you can see people who are nicer and better and more loving than those who profess to be Christians or believers.

[12 : 11] They are doing by nature what is in their hearts, and Paul speaks about that here. And when the level, the field, when it's a level playing field, outwardly they are nicer, better people.

That's hugely challenging, isn't it? They gave God a bad name. These people here in Rome, these Jewish people who profess to believe, they dishonored God.

Okay. So what did it mean? What did it mean that they dishonored God in this way? And this particularly, can I ask you to listen to this? If you felt that up till now it's kind of a religious kind of disagreement from thousands of years ago that doesn't really relate to us, can I ask you to listen to this?

Because it's at the very core of the gospel message with all its privileges and all that we know where we are today as we take God's living Word and apply it to our own hearts and to our own lives.

The first thing we know and recognize is that their knowledge, their knowledge condemned them. Okay. They had great knowledge of the Bible. They had great knowledge about God.

[13 : 26] They had huge privileges with respect to the law. And remember what the law was? What was the law? It was the Ten Commandments, wasn't it?

What's the Ten Commandments? Love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. It's laws of love, okay? They're relational. They're relational laws, laws of love.

That's what they had, and they'd fail miserably because they misunderstood the purpose of the law. The law that they were given by God was to point them to God and to point them to their need of God because they couldn't fulfill the law.

It was to point them to the places where they didn't love Him and where they didn't love their neighbor. It wasn't there to make them to foster pride and self-righteous and tick off commandment one.

Yes, commandment two. Yes, commandment three. I've done it. It wasn't meant for that. It was meant to expose their need and for them to go to God and ask Him to help them because they were lost sinners.

[14 : 36] It wasn't a moral code for them to expertly dissect and obey on their own terms, but not allow to seep into their own hearts.

Are you hearing that? Am I hearing that? That the law is not something with which we beat other people who are less moral than us and tick the boxes.

It is for us to go to and recognize, I don't love God and I don't love my neighbor perfectly. I need a redeemer and I need the Holy Spirit to enable me to live this law of love so their knowledge condemned them.

And that can apply to all of us. But also their religion condemned them, didn't it? Because they were relying on their rituals, the outward behavior, the act of circumcision, the covenantal signs, but it exposed their abject hypocrisy.

They lived religion on the outside. They were Pharisees and scribes. They were good people as it were on the outside, but they didn't allow the religion of their fathers and the religion that God had given them to expose their hearts.

[15 : 50] They allowed religion to hide their hearts. Mmm, that's interesting. We can use religion in exactly the same way, to hide our hearts. We can come to church.

We can read the Bible. We can be morally upright. Then we can compare ourselves to others and we can hide, use the outward trappings of religion. I'm definitely going to go to church today.

That's important. I want to be seen to be going to church. I want to be there and I'll fulfill that particular requirement. I'll tick the box and we'll allow the outward trappings of religion to hide our own sense of need and our own sense of abject spiritual poverty before the living God, trying to earn His favor, which we know is insulting to God, don't we?

Because He sees our hearts and He's provided the answer for us. That's what the law was intended to do. It was to bring us to Christ. It was our school teacher to bring us to Jesus Christ, to help us to see our need of Christ.

So their knowledge condemned them, their religion condemned them, but much, much more importantly, as we begin to draw it together, they condemned Christ.

[17 : 07] So their knowledge condemned them and their religion condemned them, but then they used that to go on and condemn Jesus Christ. And that is what Paul is exposing.

He's bringing them to see that everyone is on a level playing field and all need the Redeemer. They condemned Christ. And verse 20 speaks about the instructor of the foolish, teacher of the children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth.

Who's the embodiment of the law of knowledge and truth as Jesus Christ? Okay? They missed the whole point of Christ.

They didn't get Christ. This is post resurrection and ascension, remember that. But they didn't get Christ. They were still hanging on to their Old Testament religion and knowledge.

But they didn't get Christ. They didn't understand that He lived the law, that they professed to love the law of love, the law of God's love.

[18 : 12] He's the only human being, the only person, divine human being who loved God and loved others perfectly.

So that He said in Matthew 5 verse 17, don't think I've come to abolish the law or the prophets. I've not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

So all of the Old Testament law of love that we have, that the Jews failed to see, Jesus was coming to fulfill that law, to live that law, to live the perfect life that they couldn't live.

And then to die, the death that we deserve, you see, and we receive His righteousness. And the law was there to lead them to Jesus.

Isn't that the tragedy? It was there to lead them to Jesus. And what did they do? They crucified Him.

[19 : 14] It was there to lead them to Jesus and they crucified Him. He was what they always failed to be under God.

He was the perfect Israel. He was the representation of God among men. He was what they prided themselves in being. He was the fulfillment of what they were supposed to be as ambassadors.

He succeeded where they failed miserably so that we can take these verses, or these characteristics in verse 20 and apply them most powerfully to Jesus Christ.

He was the guide for the blind. He was the light for those in darkness. They were supposed to be a light to the Gentiles. Isaiah 42.6 says that, but they failed.

They were darker and darker than anything they pointed. They made people condemn God rather than bring people to the light of God. So Jesus in John 8.12 says, I am the light of the world.

[20 : 19] I am the light of the world. He's the instructor of the foolish. He is the teacher of infants, of the immature. He spoke to the non-Jews. He spoke to the chaos and to the children who would sit in his knee.

He spoke to the uneducated. These were the ones he did all the things that Israel had failed to do because they forgot their calling.

What did they do? They crucified him. And it's interesting that that is the act that categorically exposes their condemnation and their guilt and ours.

The law boasters murder the law giver. Oh, the irony, isn't it? Irony that the law giver is nailed to a cross by the law boasters.

I'm going to use two big words there and then I'm going to make simple words. They exacerbated their guilt exponentially, just showing off. I'm not actually, but they are great words, but it just made their guilt far greater in a huge, to a huge degree.

[21 : 38] And in the very act of that rejection by them, when they rejected the law keeper, he's working out their redemption. Given that an amazing paradox that the law keeper himself becomes the law breaker to change everything.

Do you see that? 2 Corinthians 5, 21, for our sake, God made him to be sin who knew no sin, sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

To the law keeper, Jesus becomes the law breaker on our behalf and takes the just price for our fellow nursing and walks into death and drinks the cup of God's wrath to the very, very end.

They condemned Christ, they missed the whole point. And I close with a simple, two simple and profound applications, okay?

Two very simple ones. One is we apply it, our hearts are the problem. Let's forget about the Jews now. Our hearts are the problem.

[23 : 07] It must, we must be warned by Scripture that at no point is our Christian faith simply the outworking of a moral code. We are not just trying to live a certain way in order to please God.

We will never do that. We will become proud and self-reliant. You can never rely, and it's important never to rely simply on your Bible knowledge, however good or great that might be, or your Christian privileges and upbringing, or your family's faith, or the denomination you belong to, or your religious observances.

You can't rely on the, don't go around relying on these things as if they will stand you in good stead when you stand before Jesus Christ on that day of judgment.

We need to recognize that the heart of the matter is the matter of the heart. It is as you come and I come and stripped back to absolute individuality before God, it is our heart that matters this morning.

It is knowing that we need a new heart, and this hard, stony, self-righteous, proud, judgmental, arrogant, lustful, heart of ours needs changed, and only God can do it in Jesus Christ through the Spirit because He's paid the price.

- [24 : 39] It's a great freeing, redeeming message. Apostasy always moves the focus from the inward to the outward. Please remember that, because we're all tempted to do it.
- I'm as tempted as anyone else, probably more so. Everybody always moves the focus from the inward to the outward, from humble obedience to empty formality.
- If you're relying on empty formality, know that you're hurtling down a one-way street with a devil on the back towards apostasy. That's where you're going because it is absolutely vital that we recognize that our hearts are the problem but that Jesus Christ is the answer.
- The second application I make is kind of related to that, is that Christ is everything. Paul is getting that across in these early chapters as he sets out the gospel, and as he sets out our need of the gospel that Christ is everything.
- So as you come today, with all your pain and your confusion, maybe with your lack of identity and your brokenness, bruised and mattered by the evil you see around you, or sometimes that you sense within your own heart, by division and by the threat and the horrible reality of death, it all stems from God's broken laws of love.
- [26 : 08] That's what it stems from. It stems from humanity turning away from His laws of love. Love me first. Love one another.
- And Jesus Christ is the only answer to that. If we think there's another answer, we're on the road towards apostasy. Jesus Christ is the only answer we have today.
- So you may be in your heart of heart sitting thinking, I'm uncomfortable with heart religion. I don't like this talk of being humble before God. I don't like the vulnerability of it.
- I don't like the change that it expresses and above all, I don't like the loss of control that it assumes. I don't need Christ.
- I'll get by with my morality by being accepted here by my religious friends, by outward observance, by doing my best in so thinking I will crucify Him.
- [27 : 07] That's what you're saying. I will crucify Him. You may have been coming to this church for 70 years and never let Christ Jesus into your heart.
- And you're saying today, I will, I have, I am crucifying Him. I don't need a redeemer. I don't need a Savior.
- Can I just say He is everything. Christ is everything. And we never graduate from these two great laws.
- Love one another. Love your neighbor. Love God. Let's bow our heads and pray briefly. Father God, help us to love you because we can't on our own, but we know that by grace and by accepting what Jesus has done and accepting that we are forgiven and covered in your righteousness, not our own, but yours, help us in gratitude to live for you.
- And grant us eyes to see, may we not be like the religious Jewish people in the time of the church in Rome who rested on their knowledge or who rested on their ritual and help us to humbly come and recognize that Christ is everything.
- [28 : 33] And may that be our great hope for Jesus' sake. Amen.