

“In Name Only”

Romans 2:1-29

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Jesus spoke some very frightening words in the Sermon on the Mount.

For example, from Matthew 7:22 “Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who **does** the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

How many who attend churches are fooling themselves?

They want to believe that everything is basically okay between God and them when in fact they are in trouble with him.

The section of the Bible we call *Romans* is a letter from the Apostle Paul to the church in Rome.

It is a letter in which Paul, at God’s direction, lays out the great “good news” - the Gospel.

Paul begins by stating it simply in 1:16 “The gospel...is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes...”

But in order to demonstrate how “good” the good news is Paul first of all must tell how “bad” the bad news is.

As we saw last week, chapter 1:18-3:20 is a long parenthetical section in the letter.

At 3:21 Paul once again picks up the theme of the “good news” where he left off in 1:17.

But in 1:18-3:20 Paul will demonstrate the “bad news” that everyone, bar none, is in desperate need of God’s salvation by grace through faith.

In the first part of that long section which we looked at last week, (1:18-32) God declares, through Paul, his judgment on people who reject the knowledge of God made available to everyone through nature.

In their rejection of God they turned to worship other things – created things or themselves - and in doing so they generally degenerated into false religions, sexual perversion and others sins against one another, examples of which are mentioned in the latter part of chapter 1.

Among those who call themselves Christians, a certain moral smugness can creep into our thinking when we see people in other religions cut themselves, perform all sorts of strange rituals, bow down before stone images, dance themselves into frenzies, and do many other bizarre things in the name of their religion.

We feel somewhat self-righteous when we consider that we have not stooped to the empty rituals and immoral practices of so many around us.

“Not us”, we think to ourselves, - “I’m so glad we have the truth!”

And so in chapter 2 God addresses himself directly to those who consider themselves just a cut above the rest of the world.

It is written to those who consider themselves religiously and morally well off.

It is written to those who assume that because they have a better religion and because they don’t stoop to the degrading practices of many around them, they are therefore free of God’s indictment - surely we are okay with God.

Today’s sermon is aimed squarely at us who attend church - we are asked not to look at those around us who sin in outrageous ways but we are asked to look at ourselves.

It is with prayerful caution that I preach what I am about to preach.

A preacher is never more vulnerable than when he is accusing others of something.

As you will hear in a minute - we are in danger of self-delusion any time we are pointing out someone else’s faults - because we are least able to see clearly our own need when we are focused on another.

God starts with a very pointed indictment.

I wish he had softened it but he loves us too much to water down the truth.

Solomon said, “Wounds from a friend can be trusted.”

Just as he did in the earlier section, so here is chapter 2, Paul starts with the conclusion of the matter -

People who are religious without a relationship with Jesus are in trouble with God.

Paul's words are somewhat like the opening statement in a criminal trial in our country - when the prosecutor lays out the charges against the accused.

Hear the indictment in God's words through Paul: Romans 2:1-5 "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. ² Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth.

³ So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? ⁴ Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance? ⁵ But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.

Verse two states what most everyone would agree with: God's judgment ought to fall on those who do the evil things others do.

But verse one says that when you agree with that statement you are condemning yourselves because you do the same things.

Our first reaction is to say we don't do those same things.

But later Paul will show that in fact we do.

For now, hear the rest of his opening argument:

So, verse 3, when you do those things, do you think you will escape God's wrath?

Clearly the implied answer is "NO, we won't escape God's wrath!"

In fact, verse 4: Don't misunderstand God's patience as approval of your way of life. Don't base your sense of security on how things are going.

You may not have experienced God's wrath yet, not because you don't deserve it but because God is giving you time to repent - to turn around.

Another fact, verse 5: You must understand that unless you do repent, unless you turn around and begin to live differently, you are simply storing up wrath for yourself.

Every day that you go without truly following Jesus you only make matters worse.

Do you remember as a child when you did something wrong and then you compounded it by lying and then assuming that because you hadn't been caught, you were okay?

When the truth is you were digging yourself in deeper and deeper - unaware that with every action you were just making the situation worse - and the consequences more severe.

We sometimes assume that because life is going rather okay - God must be basically pleased with us.

Paul writes in essence, don't misunderstand, God's apparent inaction right now is not evidence of God's unconcern or disregard but IS indication that you are heaping more and more fuel on the blaze that God will eventually ignite in his judgment on you.

What an opening statement by the prosecutor!

In Romans 1 Paul was discussing those people who are pagan, those who don't know anything about the OT or the NT, those who have made false religions and have stooped to all sorts of immoral behavior.

It's easy to imagine that as the Jews, with their religious background, read Paul's indictment of the pagans around them, they would all agree that God surely ought to pour out his wrath on those wicked people.

But now in Chapter 2 Paul begins to indict the Jews.

You can easily imagine what they are thinking at that point.

- "Wait a minute. Don't you know who you're talking to?"
- "We are the chosen people of God."
- "What audacity to think, and worse yet to say, that we deserve the same wrath that those pagans around us deserve."

In our context we respond similarly: “Wait a minute, preacher. What are you talking about? We’re here aren’t we? We are the good guys - the ones who go to church.

How dare you put me in the same camp with some of those people who work in my office, who live in my neighborhood, and who we read about in the papers?

How dare you suggest we are under the same condemnation as those pagans around the world?

In our text, it is as if Paul anticipates their objections and answers them very carefully.

In verses 6-16 Paul will set forth two biblical principles that give him the right to say what he has said.

Then in verses 17-24 he will apply the principles to those who are outwardly religious but inwardly unchanged.

And finally in the rest of the chapter he will answer yet one more objection that religious people raise.

Troubling as it is, let’s not forget the charge being made here - **Many religiously oriented people are heading right into the wrath of God in spite of their presumed connection with God.**

So what are the two biblical principles on which this indictment is based?

Principle #1 is in verses 6-11 God judges impartially on a very definite standard.

You’ll find it in the 6th verse and in the 11th verse it is restated:

2:6 “God will give to each person according to what he has done.”

2:11 “For God does not show favoritism.

In Vv 7-10 Paul spells it out: Those who live holy lives will have eternal life and those who live unholy lives will receive the wrath of God.

Romans 2:7-10 “To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.⁸ But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.⁹ There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile;¹⁰

but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

Now if you know the Gospel that we are saved by grace through faith something about those verses will bother you.

But here it plainly says:

“To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life

“But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.

Now as much as that might bother my understanding of the Gospel those words do seem consistent with what God’s word says elsewhere:

Galatians 6:7-8 “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.

Romans 8:13 “For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live...”

And this is what Jesus taught in Matthew 25 in the metaphor of sheep and goats – it was those who did the will of the Father who entered eternal life at the last judgment.

Now that ought to make a lot of outwardly religious people nervous.

I know that it might sound to some of you as if I’m saying that we become Christians by our works, by doing the right things.

But that is not the subject here.

Paul is NOT describing how one becomes a Christian; he will do that later.

He is here describing the method God will use in judging all people in the end.

Verses 7 and 10 describe the person whose life reflects a true conversion to Jesus Christ – a faith that works – a faith that makes a difference.

Verses 8 and 9 describe a person whose life reflects the rejection of God's grace and will in their lives – they “reject the truth and follow evil.”

In the Evangelical rush to make certain no one trusts in their works to make them right with God, we have too often separated faith and works so completely that we leave the impression that how we live our lives doesn't ultimately matter.

But God's Word will have none of that kind of thinking.

When God saves a man or a woman, it changes them.

The gospel is the power of God for salvation – full salvation.

It's not just a ticket to be turned in at the “pearly gate.”

The Gospel begins to remake a man or woman or it isn't the gospel. In the final judgment the evidence of genuine faith will be shown in the life that was lived.

We tend to focus on conversion as a past experience with a future reward and forget that real salvation results in a present life change.

We like to focus on God's saving us from the eternal consequences of our sins – eternal punishment, separated from God.

But even the word “convert” indicates a new direction, an active outworking of the conversion.

We tend to ignore the present on-going consequences of God's saving power – to release us from the power of sin to control our lives now and to empower us by his Spirit to become more and more like Jesus – fit for God's presence – fit for heaven.

The salvation the Bible speaks of is not only past and future but also present!

- It begins with God's convicting and convincing work to bring us to trust in Christ for the forgiveness of our sins and a commitment of our lives to Christ's Lordship.
- It continues with God's Spirit changing us, transforming us, and conforming us to the likeness of Jesus.
- It culminates in his judgment at the end of the age – where he deems us fit for his eternal presence.

Paul is not here describing the basis of salvation – The basis of salvation is grace through faith which he will explain that later.

Here he is describing the basis of judgment – all people will be judged on the same criteria - the genuineness of their faith as evidenced in their lives.

Now on that same theme, I want you to see Principle # 2 as found in Romans 2:12-16 “All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law.

¹³ For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.

¹⁴ (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, ¹⁵ since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) ¹⁶ This will take place on the day when God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

Verse 13 is the heart of it: “For it is not those who **hear** the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who **obey** the law who will be declared righteous.

Here’s the principle said differently: “When it comes to God’s final judgment of a person it is not what he or she knows but what they’ve done.”

In Vv 14-15 Paul makes a parenthetical statement referring back to the non-Jews that he indicted in chapter 1.

Even pagans know something of God’s laws, God’s requirements of people.

In addition to having some specific knowledge of God from creation as we saw in chapter 1 (knowledge which they suppress) here we learn that all people have an intuitive sense of at least some of God’s laws.

They have an instinctual sense of right and wrong that is God-given.

And Paul will soon point out that everyone violates that knowledge as well.

And so back to V12 - whether it is a person who has had access to God's Word or not - all will be judged by how they have lived in response to the will of God.

And V16 declares that that judgment will take place on the day when God will judge everything - including people's secrets - when Jesus comes again.

So here again are the two principles:

#1 With no place for favoritism for the religious person, God will judge everyone by the same standard - do their lives reflect obedience to God?

#2 Again with no favoritism for the religious person, God will judge everyone not according to what they know but according to what they do.

Now beginning at V17 Paul is going to apply these principles to the Jews, the religious people.

Romans 2:17-24 "Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; ¹⁸ if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; ¹⁹ if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— ²¹ you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? ²² You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? ²⁴ As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

- You consider yourself appropriately religious.
- You are Protestant or Catholic not a member of some cult.
- You attend an evangelical church that teaches the right things.
- You believe the Bible is God's Word.
- You take some pride in the fact that you are a Christian not a Hindu or a Buddhist or something else.
- You think you have the right religion and others are wrong.
- You think the Bible is the guide to the right kind of life.

All of that, BUT WHAT? You're hypocrites!
Your lives don't conform to what you profess.

You say certain things are wrong but you wind up doing them yourselves.
I'm not describing true Christians who care about living holy lives but oftentimes fail.

I'm talking about those mentioned in V4 - they show contempt for God's judgment by not caring that their lives are out of sync with their purported belief in Jesus.

They've been part of the church and hanging around God's Word and God's people for years - but they have no interest in following Jesus.

They are what are known as "nominal" Christians.
The word "nominal" means "in name only".

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his challenging book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, has written, "Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner... The world goes on in the same old way, and we are still sinners... (We) let the Christian live like the rest of the world, let him model himself on the world's standards in every sphere of life, (rather than) aspiring to live a different life under grace from his old life under sin." ⁴⁶

"Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ. It remains an abstract idea, a myth which has a place for the Fatherhood of God, but omits Christ as the living Son. ... There is trust in God, but no following of Christ. ⁶⁴

These are the men and women who for some reason want to be known as Christian but whose lifestyles are incompatible with an ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ and the values of his kingdom.

These are the people who like the false security of knowing the truth without taking responsibility for living it.

These people would argue vehemently that they believe - but they don't care enough about what they believe to consider how it applies to their lives.

They claim the Bible is the inspired word of God but they don't consider that

belief significant enough that they want to read it carefully and live their lives by it.

In fact when the Gallup organization does polls of church-goers in general compared to those who don't go to church at all, there isn't much, if any, difference between the two groups in terms of what they know, what they believe, the values they hold and what they do. The lifestyles are nearly indistinguishable.

(That is not true however when the "highly committed" or "born again" Christian is compared to the one who doesn't go to church - the differences then are striking.)

In fact according to V24 "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of these "in name only" religious people.

Because of the lives of these "in name only" Christians - God is considered irrelevant at best or foolish at worst by those who see the hypocrisy of the "nominal" Christian.

I hate it when I am asked to do the funeral of someone whom everyone knew had no real time for God, for his Church, or his kingdom work and yet I am asked to pretend that this person was a Christian and is now in "a better place".

What a mockery of God and his grace to change our lives!

The Jew in Paul's day and the nominal Christian in our day assume they are okay with God because they have the right religious connections.

But on the basis of two principles - God judges impartially and by a definite standard AND God judges not on what people say they know but on what they do -

on that basis those religious people were under the same condemnation as the pagan idol-worshippers and moral perverts.

If you are not living for the Kingdom of God you have no right to think all is well between you and God no matter how long you have been in the church, no matter how many times you have prayed a prayer of repentance, or no matter how long your family has been part of the Christian church. But in verse 25 we can hear the "in name only" religious person raising yet one more objection to the indictment:

Wait a minute - I'm a Jew! I'm one of the chosen people of God. I've been circumcised - I did the right ceremonial thing, I'm part of the "in-group".

Or else, "My grandfather was a Baptist minister, I've been baptized, dedicated, confirmed, and prayed for.

I prayed a sinner's prayer at a Bible camp when I was a kid; I talked to a counselor at youth camp one winter.

I've joined the church, served on a committee and sung in the choir.

2:25-29 "Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised.

²⁶ If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised?

²⁷ The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.

²⁸ A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical.

²⁹ No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God."

The truth is that a pedigree is of no value when it comes to judgment.

To go back to where the indictment began - V1 "you therefore have no excuse" - you are under God's wrath.

That's the "bad" news.

It will be a little while before Paul gets to the "good" news but right here at the end of this chapter - he gives a glimpse of it:

Look at V29 again - "No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God

A man is not a Christian if he is a Christian "in name only" - only outwardly.

But a man or a woman is a true Christian if they are one inwardly - if

their religious experience is not just external but if it is a change of the heart by God's grace that results in a change of life.

That change of heart **and life** is brought about by the Spirit of God - not just by saying you believe certain things.

Do you realize this morning that you are a Christian "in name only"?

Do you realize that according to God's own word you stand just as condemned as any immoral pagan in some idol-worshipping village?

Do you now know that no religious affiliation, no ceremonial rituals of the past, or no amount of religious pedigree mean anything with God.

Do you realize that you need a change of heart so there can be a true change of life?

Today God, by His Spirit, will circumcise your heart; he will change it.

Will you come to Him, seeking his forgiveness, ready to turn from your old ways and ready to follow Him - truly follow him as the Lord of your life?

Please bow with me in prayer?

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