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The Heart of the Matter

Romans 2:17-24, 28-29

Introduction

1. Some children are quick to point out their parents inconsistencies.
2. As parents, we may speak in their presence of why someone shouldn't do this or that, only to have them reply, "But Dad or Mom, you do that!"
3. Quite embarrassing, isn't it, to have them point out our inconsistencies.
4. Last week we looked at what Paul had to say to the Christians in Rome about passing judgment upon someone else when they themselves "practiced the same things" (Romans 2:1b).

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5. He even asked them, "But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God?" (Romans 2:3, NASB95)
6. This morning, as we look further in Paul's letter, we find him addressing those whose pride in their position had caused them to become blind to their own shortcomings.
7. There is an important message for us in what Paul has to say to these individuals.
8. It is important because he calls us to keep our focus upon that which truly matters, our hearts.

[Let's look at what the apostle Paul has to say to us about those dangers.]

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I. There Are Two Things Against Which We Must Guard

A. THE PRIDE OF PRIVILEGE

“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,” (Romans 2:17–18, NASB95)

1. Paul lists a number of things in which the Jews in the church in Rome had tremendous pride:

a. “If you bear the name “Jew””

- 1) They were proud of their honorable name — “Jew”
- 2) They were God’s chosen people.

“For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.” (Deuteronomy 7:6, NASB95)

b. “If you . . . rely upon the Law”

- 1) They believed their possession of the Law gave them a unique standing before God.
- 2) They were the only ones to whom God had revealed His will at Mount Sinar.

c. “If you . . . boast in God”

- 1) They bragged about their relationship with God.
- 2) He was their Father.

“You, O Lord, are our Father, Our Redeemer from of old is Your name.” (Isaiah 63:16b, NASB95)

d. “If you . . . know His will”

- 1) It had been revealed to them through Moses and the Prophets.
- 2) No other people had such knowledge.

- e. “If you . . . approve the things that are essential (“excellent,” ESV, NKJV; “superior,” NIV84, HCSB).
 - 1) They had instructions on what to eat, how to live and worship.
- f. “If you . . . are instructed from the Law”
 - 1) “O how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Psalm 119:97).
- 2. When they compared what God had revealed to them with the vain mythology of the Gentiles they knew they were certainly a privileged people.
- 3. We can look back today and see their spiritual blindness.
- 4. However, like the Jews of Paul’s day, it is easy for us to believe that we are okay because we know so much more about the Bible than the average person.
 - a. We know God’s revealed will (the Bible) so well.
 - b. We can find the verses we need to tell others what they must do.
- 5. It is only natural, when we look at the dark world around us, to imagine that we are okay because we have a patent on the truth!
- 6. However, we must not become prideful because God has privileged us to know His Word.

Slide 4**B. THE PRIDE OF ARROGANT PRESUMPTION**

“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,” (Romans 2:19–20, NASB95)

- 1. According to Paul, the Jews considered themselves to be . . .
 - a. “a guide to the blind” (v. 19)
 - b. “a light to those who are in darkness” (v. 19)
 - c. “a corrector (instructor) of the foolish” (v. 20)

- d. “a teacher of the immature” (v. 20)
- 2. Because of this they looked down upon those around them with condescension.
- 3. William Barclay, in his commentary on this passage, states that the Jews in Alexandria allegedly took an oath never to show kindness to a Gentile.¹
- 4. Before we become too judgmental we must recognize that for us as Christians, any such prideful presumption on our part can also cause us to become self-righteous and self-centered.
- 5. While I shared this with you last week, I want us to go back to a parable which Luke records in chapter 18 of his gospel.
- 6. He tells us that it was a parable which Jesus told “to some people who trusted in themselves that they were very righteous, and viewed others with contempt” (v. 9).

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“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. “The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ‘I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’ “But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’” (Luke 18:10–13, NASB95)

- ❑ We must be very careful to avoid any self-righteous arrogance because of the spiritual truth we may possess.
- 6. Paul asked some very pointed questions in an attempt to bring about change in the lives of those to whom he was writing (vv. 21-23).

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“you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who

¹ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), p. 45.

preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God?" (Romans 2:21–23, NASB95)

7. In the next verse 24 Paul identified the outcome of their hypocritical behavior, "For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."
8. God isn't impressed by our claims of having the truth as much as He is by whether or not we live that truth out in our lives on a daily basis.

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II. God's Focus Is Upon One Aspect Of Our Lives

A. IT ISN'T OUR ACTIONS BECAUSE THEY CAN DECEIVE

1. The Jews thought they were God's people because of the practice of circumcision.
 - a. God had instituted the practice of circumcision as a sign of His covenant with Abraham over 500 years before He gave Moses the Law (cf. Genesis 17).

"This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised."

(Genesis 17:10, NASB95)

- b. Circumcision symbolized moral purity and separation from the world to God.
 - c. Under Moses, it became the sign of membership in the covenant community.

"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."

(Romans 2:25, NASB95)

2. When Paul wrote, “circumcision is of value if you practice the Law” he was referring to a lifestyle of obedience to God’s law.
3. But for the Jew who violated the Law, Paul said his circumcision was as if he had never been circumcised, it was meaningless — “as meaningless as a wedding ring on an adulterer’s finger” (Hughes).
4. In the days of Jeremiah the prophet, there were those who thought that God would never allow an invading army to destroy Jerusalem and take them captive because the Temple of God was in Jerusalem (Jeremiah 7:3-4).

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“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, “Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. “Do not trust in deceptive words, saying, ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.’” (Jeremiah 7:3-4, NASB95)

5. To apply this truth to us today, all we have to do is substitute any of a number of terms for the word “circumcision.”
 - a. Baptism — “I was baptized 30 years ago by Brother So-and -so.”
 - b. Church membership — “I’ve been a member of the Waverly church of Christ for 25 years.”
 - c. Church attendance — “I’ve been attending here since this building was built.”
6. But, what Paul would say to us is similar to what he said to those Jews in Rome: “Your baptism, your church membership, your church attendance are all meaningless if you have not been living the life which our Lord has called us to live.

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B. GOD’S FOCUS IS UPON OUR HEARTS

“For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. 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.” (Romans 2:28–29, NASB95)

1. What God sought among the Jews was a circumcision of the heart (vv. 28-29), a cutting away of all that which keeps us from faithfully serving Him.
2. Long ago, Moses said to the Israelites, “Moreover 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, so that you may live.” (Deuteronomy 30:6, NASB95)
3. The prophet Jeremiah called upon his people to deal with their hearts, “Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, circumcise your hearts” (Jeremiah 4:4a, NIV).
4. Outward circumcision is meaningless — God’s seeks an inward change.
5. One writer changed two words in these verses in order to apply it to us today:

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“For he is not a Christian who is one outwardly, nor is that “church Membership” which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Christian who is one inwardly; and “church membership” is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter, whose praise is not of men, but of God.” ²

6. Jesus has always looked at our hearts.

“Your shall love the Lord your God will all your heart . . .” (Matthew 22:37).

“ . . . for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21).

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“That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. “For from

² Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Man’s Ruin, God’s Wrath, Volume 1* (Fincastle, VA: Scripture Truth Book Co., n.d.), pp. 127, 128).

within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. “All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.”” (Mark 7:20–23, NASB95)

7. God is not fooled by anyone’s outward show — He still looks at the heart to see if there is real change.

Conclusion

1. What Paul is saying to us today is that we may possess the truth of God’s Word, we may have been baptized into Christ for the remission of our sins, but if we act self-righteous and look upon others with contempt then God will judge us.
2. If Paul were standing here preaching this sermon today, I believe he would tell us that if we live our lives in disregard for the way in which God commands us to live, not only do we cause others to blaspheme God’s holy Name, but we make our baptism and our church affiliation meaningless.

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3. God once spoke through the prophet Isaiah and said, “to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word” (Isaiah 66:2b).
4. Does this describe you?
5. If not, let me encourage you to take the steps necessary to change your heart and your life.