

Who is Praised by God?
Romans 2:17-29
Berean Baptist Church
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INTRODUCTION

These first two chapters of Romans have been hard. They were meant to be this way, because confronting sin is hard, but a disease must be diagnosed before it can be cured. First, in chapter one Paul showed that the unrestrained, godless world was both self-condemned and damned by God. Second, Paul opens chapter two by showing that even the generally ethical among the godless were condemned because they were doing what they knew to be wrong. Finally, in the last half of chapter two, Paul turns to the last group of humanity: those who worship the One True God.

Where do we stand? Are we in the same bad shape as everyone else? Consider Jesus' parable in Luke 18:9-14. Jesus' point there is essentially the same as this passage in Romans:

Those who trust in external righteousness, good upbringing, or symbols of the faith are no better off than the heathen of the dark world. We will see from this text that God seeks after one thing: a heart willing to obey and ready to be changed. Unless you are ready to be changed in the inner-person, all of the religion in the world will not help you.

Do not trust on any outward thing for your salvation. You must ask God to change your heart!

Romans 2:17-20 Clean on the Outside...

Here Scripture addresses a general person who worships God. Paul is not speaking of all people who call themselves Jewish, but he is speaking generally about a kind of person. This person stands for every upright God-fearing, church-going person in the world. What is said is directly applicable to observant Jewish people at the time Paul wrote this, and it is just as applicable for us church-goers today. Things certainly look very good at the outset...

Vs 17 This person proudly wears the title "Jewish" in their religion. They abide in the Ten Commandments ("rest" has the idea of settling down upon) and brag about the greatness of their God. This is much like the way we call ourselves Christians, study the Bible, and witness to others. These can be good things!

Vs 18 They know God's will, have spiritual discernment and are instructed from the Word. Contrast this with the heathen of darkened minds and vile passions. The observant Jew should certainly be better off!

Vs 20 "form of knowledge," the idea is a pattern or an example. This person shows the right way of living to the foolish and the simple.

None of this is bad. If we suspect some self-righteous pride in this person, it is not based on what Paul says in *these* verses. If you have grown up with God's revelation, if you have been spared much the waste of the sin in your life, you are in a wonderful position! But I want you to notice something right away: the knowledge of God's will, being named God's chosen, being a guide to the blind, and all of these other excellencies are not the main thing that God wants from you. See Mark 10:17-22 and Luke 18:18-23 – God simply wants obedience.

But do not trust in self (excellent work, your wealth, or your reputation) to save you. Come to Jesus for a change of heart.

Jesus is not looking for nearly perfect people who respect Him and depend on themselves, Jesus is looking for sinners who will turn their back on sin, self-righteousness and the world, to follow Him.

God does want us His people to be excellent lights in the world, but there is something wrong with the person Paul is talking about; there is something more important than our outward light...

Romans 2:21-24 But Rotten on the Inside

With one apocalyptic question, the Holy Spirit uncovers the ugliest spiritual situation we will see in Romans: hypocrisy. This is the answer to our starting question: "are the religious better off." The fact is that the hypocritical religious are worse off than any other group of humanity.

Vs 21 "Teachest thou not thyself" if Paul were saying this today he might say, "Don't you practice what you preach?" In fact, Paul also uses the word "preach" in the same verse. If you have taken it upon yourself to teach others, you will be held to a higher standard, but you should at least do what you teach others to do.

Vs 21-22 list three very common sins:

stealing – There are many ways of stealing. Mal 3:10. Mark 7:11-13. Do you take what belongs to another?

adultery – and many ways of committing adultery. Matt 5:27-28

sacrilege - "sacrilege" is literally "robbing temples." These temples would be pagan temples. The problem was not that the Hebrews were violating temples. The problem was that God's people were being defiled by the merchandise of those temples. The money and goods of the pagan temples were earned by idolatry; they were the fruit of lies. The hypocrites say that they detested false worship, but they have no problem profiting from it.

Do you profit from false worship? Do you compromise your testimony so that you can make money?

Vs 23 "Thou that makest thy boast" This takes us right back to Vs 1. You who boast of following the Law and having a relationship with God, you break the law and dishonor God!

Vs 24 This tragic reversal gets even worse! The godly person thought of themselves as a "guide," "light," "instructor," and "teacher" in Vs 19-20, but they are the reason that God is being blasphemed!

Now we see in tragic light that the believing hypocrite, for all of his religious observances, is worse off than the darkened heathen of chapter one! The darkened heathen refuses to retain God in his knowledge, but the religious hypocrite boasts of knowing God's will while he violates it.

Ironically, the ones who most need a savior are the ones who are most religious and know the most about God.

Do not trust in mere outward obedience; forsake hypocrisy! Come to the Lord for a change of heart!

Romans 2:25-26 The Symbol

As religious people, we are tempted to depend on the symbols of our religion. Paul's hypothetical Jewish opponent depends on is circumcision in the same way that we might be tempted to depend on our baptism or church attendance. God gave Abraham the symbol of circumcision as a sign of the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants (Gen 17:7-14).

Vs 25 “keep” the Law. This means to do the acts of the Law, not to hear, or promise, or boast but simply to do what is right.

Vs 25-26 "circumcision is made uncircumcision." What a switch! For all the religious man's good acts and good background (Vs 17-20), he might as well be uncircumcised (outside of the family of God) because he is a hypocrite. In fact, the uncircumcised heathen who does good consistently is more in the family of God than the religious man.

Why are these religious people not really following the Law that they hope in? Because they have a problem with their soul – their heart or inward-person. And when we do not want to deal with the inner-person we focus on the outward symbol.

Luke 20:46 Beware of the scribes, which desire to walk in long robes, and love greetings in the markets, and the highest seats in the synagogues, and the chief rooms at feasts;
47 Which devour widows' houses, and for a shew make long prayers: the same shall receive greater damnation.

Do not trust in symbols! Come to the Lord for a change of heart!

Romans 2:27-29 The Heart of the Matter

Vs 27 “judge thee” there is bitter irony in this. The observant religious man started this passage as an instructor, guide and teacher, but now he is to be judged by those who he presumed to teach. And he will not even be judged by people that share his religion; the hypocrite is worthy to be judged by heathens!

Vs 28 “not a Jew” Again the truth turns the world upside down. The observant religious person started this passage by loudly taking the name of “Jew” upon himself, resting in the Law, and boasting about his God. But the Scripture says that he is actually not a Jew; he is not even truly circumcised!

See the contrast between what is seen and what it real. The hypocrite loudly proclaims his holiness but in God's eyes, he might as well not even have the symbol of the covenant. The real identity and sign of being in the family of God are not visible to flesh and blood: it is a changed heart!

Vs 29 “inwardly” literally: “secretly” what truly makes someone a person of God is not seen by human eyes because it is a “circumcision of the heart.” This change of heart of the cutting away of the flesh from the inward person was not a new idea! Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 9:25–26; Ezek. 44:7.

Vs 29 "spirit" vs "letter", the external changes of the old covenant were good but they were according to the external form of the covenant: the physical form of the Law. The change that God seeks to make is an internal, spiritual, change.

Vs 29 “whose praise is not of men, but of God.” This is one of the sweetest, most hopeful notes in all of Scripture. Men praise the self-reliant, the hypocrites who don't get caught, and the very religious who obsess over symbols. But God praises the changed heart!

Do not trust in outward praise! Come to the Lord for a change of heart!

CONCLUSION

We started this by asking the question "are religious in as bad-a-shape as everyone else?" And the sad answer is that we are worse off because we alone are capable of hypocrisy which God hates most. Being religious is good, God made us be religious, but this passage shows that the religious need a savior.

Do you know that our God is in the business of changing hearts? And if you allow Him to change you He will praise you! These first two chapters of Romans have shown that all people from all walks of life are basically broken and need to be saved, now we begin to see how we can be saved: by God changing our hearts and cutting away the corrupt nature that plagues us. Much could be said about how we can have this change, but a few starting points will be helpful:

God's change starts with salvation; Jesus' work is your only hope for lasting change. 2 Cor 5:17
If you want to be changed, you must be saved!

God changes the humble. Psl 34:18
If you want to be changed, be humble!

God's change is like spiritual surgery; it's not always comfortable. Ezk 18:31
If you want to be changed, be willing to be uncomfortable!

God's change is faithful; once He has started, you can rest assured that He will finish. Phil 1:6
If you want to be changed, have endurance knowing that God does not give up on you!

God's change is a process of daily decisions that we must make. Col Ch 3
If you want to be changed, you must make the daily choice to put on Christ.

God's change is driven by hearing and learning Scripture. Jer 23:29
If you want to be changed, fill your life with the Word.

God's change is strongly associated with doing good works. Eph 2:10
If you want to be changed, do the works that He has prepared for you.

You must ask God to change your heart. Do not trust on any outward thing for your salvation!