

All Roads Lead Here: Breaking The Law
By Jason Huff
January 12, 2017
Jeremiah 4:1-4; Matthew 23:23-26; Romans 2:17-29

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Romans 2:17-29. May God add His richest blessings to the reading of His Holy Word. “Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth -- you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? 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. A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. 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.”

What’s your heritage? Growing up in Indianapolis, I didn’t really know the background of any of my classmates. It never came up. I never knew if someone had Irish ancestors or German or French or Dutch. But heritage means a lot here. Drive within five miles of our home and you can find an Italian-American club, lots of Polish restaurants, a synagogue and a Jewish cemetery, and that’s only scratching the surface.

Heritage can make a big difference in what jobs you’re offered and your social standing. Family connections get you work on the line or washing dishes. My first job apart from delivering newspapers were working at Jonathan Byrd’s Cafeteria and Catering – because my dad hired me. We all have connections – some help us, and some we’d prefer we didn’t have. But who our forefathers were and where we come from plays a role in who we become.

That’s important to remember as we work through Paul’s letter to the Romans today. Paul has been systematically making a case for the gospel. The gospel is the good news that Jesus lived, died, and was resurrected three days after He was crucified. He taught that through faith in Him, we could have His righteousness – His right standing with God. To understand just what good news that is, we have to believe the bad news – we need Jesus’ righteousness because the wrath of God is on everyone who disobeys Him. We need Jesus’ righteousness because we have no hope of standing before God without it. Paul showed us that the Gentiles – the pagans who weren’t Jews, who weren’t part of God’s chosen people – were wildly sinful who plummeted into a downward spiral of disobedience. But now Paul’s focus is on the Jews, to show that *no one* is righteous before God.

Paul's opening sentences are super sharp, and they illustrate that we often have a very lofty view of ourselves. This was especially true of the first century Jews. Over the centuries, the Jewish people had created their own manmade codes that they believed would keep them from ever breaking the Old Testament Law. They thought through their special code of rules and restrictions – harsher codes than the original Law, they thought – they could live perfectly and thus God would be indebted to them. And because they were God's chosen people, marked by circumcision, they felt guaranteed a place in God's Kingdom. That's what Paul is attacking.

You just feel the sarcasm: “you are convinced you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, and a teacher of infants.” It's hard to tell from the original Greek whether Paul is intentionally sarcastic because this was a common attitude among the Jewish leaders. They would thank God they were so good. A daily prayer of Jewish men in this century was, “Thank you, God, that I was not born a Gentile pagan, a slave, or a woman.”

In Luke 18:11-12, Jesus tells a parable about a Pharisee who prays, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” Does that sound much like a prayer to you? This religious leader was bragging to God about how good he was! Jesus went on to say that the tax collector who cried out, “Have mercy on me, O God, for I am a sinner,” he was the one who was right before God.

Jesus spent a great deal of his ministry tearing down the idea that we could perfectly obey the Law by being morally upright all the time. He showed how impossible that was. He showed why we needed His salvation. That's what Paul is getting at when he says, “You have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth – you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?”

The Jewish leaders were very careful to follow their own rules – they gave a tenth of everything they got, even down to the tiniest herbs in their gardens. They were obsessive about being ritually pure, so every cup and saucer was ritually cleaned before they used it. They really did think they loved God and were right with Him. They really thought they were superior and could train the Gentiles who lived near them a thing or two.

But their man-made rules, the codes they created so they would never break the letter of the Old Testament Law, gave them ways to cheat, to steal, to treat others poorly. Their man-made law had loopholes that allowed them to dishonor the Sabbath day God had commanded them to keep. It allowed them to cut off their parents financially and take advantage of the least fortunate in society. It allowed them to divorce their wives for any reason, leaving them impoverished while allowing the men to remarry again and again. It allowed them to do all sorts of things that broke the intention of God's law, that we should love God with everything we have and love our neighbors as ourselves. You can't love God if you are constantly taking advantage of your neighbor and seeking your own good at his loss.

Paul references the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel, saying, "As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'" People see through our words to our actions. If you say one thing but do another, people don't believe you. To the Romans, first century Israel was unruly and hard to govern. They claimed fanatical devotion to God, but they would trade it away for power. Think about Jesus' trial. When Jesus was presented to them as "king of the Jews," the religious leaders, the ones who wanted so desperately to be out from Roman rule, who had refused to bow down to other gods, answered, "We have no king but Caesar." They so wanted Jesus gone, they would bend the knee to the man who fashioned himself a living god.

Now let's move it into our day, into the present. What can we learn from this? Here's our first key point: *Hypocrisy is one of the church's greatest adversaries, but coming clean about our hypocrisy is one of our greatest strengths.* Hypocrisy is not a Jewish problem. It's not a Christian problem. It's a human problem. Because of our sin nature, we say one thing and we do another all the time.

Our culture is loaded with it. Have you ever thought about the fact that we use supermodels to sell hamburgers, fluffy polar bears to sell Coca-Cola, and Clydesdale horses to sell beer? Wouldn't it be better just to talk about the quality of the food? Or is our food not good enough to sell itself? Or let's talk about even deeper hypocrisy. Alcohol ads sell us a picture of good times and success in life. The problem is, the abuse of alcohol is precisely what keeps us from having success in life and good times.

But it's personal, too. None of us is immune. We say, "Isn't gun violence terrible?" on the way to see the next superhero movie with guns blazing. We say, "Isn't the hookup culture awful?" on our way to see the next *50 Shades of Gray* film. Does anybody here like kale? Nobody likes kale, but oh, everybody should be eating it. It's so good for you. If you tell me I should be eating kale and I catch you at Taco Bell, we're going to have a conversation!

Now hypocrisy is a fact of life, but when it comes to the church, it's devastating. I personally think that nothing damages the church's witness more than when we say one thing and act completely differently. How many people hear that the Christian God is kind, loving, merciful, and compassionate, and then keep running into Christians who are unkind, unloving, unmerciful, and heartless? When E. Stanley Jones, one of the the most famous missionaries to India, asked Mahatma Ghandi how it would be possible to bring Jesus to India, Ghandi (a Hindu) replied, "I would suggest that all of you Christians live more like Jesus Christ."

It is hard to follow Jesus' example, but easy to think we have all the answers. I still remember when I was fifteen and a camp counselor at our church's camp for 3rd-5th graders. I had it all figured out. I was a know-it-all. I was convinced of my goodness before God and that I could teach these young boys God's ways. We had a "Bible answer man" afternoon in our cabin, and I was sure I was giving them the right answers. The problem was, I was giving them all the morals and none of the grace. My answers were rigid and carved in stone. I was sharing my wonderful knowledge of God with them. But I left out the gospel.

Thankfully, one of the associate pastors at the church was the cabin leader, and he was a part of the conversation. I'd give an answer, and then he'd steer it another direction. He would illustrate how my answer was incomplete, how I'd left out God's grace to us in Jesus. I remember being so honked off at him that day; how dare he challenge my answers! Now I look back and I think, "Thank God my pastor was there fixing all the wrong answers I gave them!"

Has the church chased away tons of people through hypocrisy? Absolutely. But you know what else? If hypocrisy damages the church, coming clean about our hypocrisy heals it. It is compelling; it shows how beautiful Christ really is. Let me explain what I mean by that.

If anyone says the church is full of hypocrites, I'm going to say, "You're exactly right. Since everybody in the world is a hypocrite, come join us. You'll fit right in!" Alright, maybe I won't put it exactly that way. But telling the truth opens up the conversation. The danger is not acknowledging and owning our hypocrisy. Are we hypocrites? Absolutely. No matter how hard we try, how good we are, we are going to be hypocrites. We don't even live up to *our own* expectations, let alone God's expectations. Of course we're hypocrites! We can't live up to the moral code given to us by God. It's impossible!

But that's the beautiful part. We come to church *to say*, "We're hypocrites." We come here to say, "Something's not right with us." We show up each week to come before God and say, "I screwed up again, I failed, and God, I need you now even more than I needed you last week when I messed up then too." That's why we have the prayer of confession right up front every single week. As a community we admit what we should be, and where we're really at. We confess we need Jesus to save us because we're so bad at being good. We need Jesus to save us from the consequences of our disobedience to God's ways.

You know what? That's compelling. No other religion offers grace to save the hypocrite who realizes it. I think it's so refreshing to say, "I don't have my life all together, I put on a good front but I'm broken, I'm weak, I'm selfish, I'm hypocritical, but I know this wonderful person named Jesus who died so I can be forgiven all the things I get wrong. Jesus is making me more than what I was yesterday. He not only forgave all my junk from yesterday, He's working in my life today, and because of His work, I'll be more like Him tomorrow than I am now."

Friends, I am a sinner. I am a hypocrite. I teach you all, and yet I struggle. I'm far from perfect. Yet I remember the simple words my late handbell director in college, Dr. Parker, told us again and again. "We aren't perfect performers but forgiven followers." I'm here to be a guide and a resource, but I'm not perfect. I don't have all the answers. I can only point you to Jesus, and He is the answer. He is the One who can forgive you and make you whole.

So let's move on and piece together what Paul says about circumcision and the Law and being a Jew and what that all means. It's confusing if you don't know the context. When God gave the law to Israel, He established circumcision as a physical sign of the promises He made to them. All Hebrew males were circumcised eight days after they were born to mark them as part of God's people. This mark meant a lot to the Hebrews – when they referred to other people groups, they called them "the uncircumcised." To be a Jewish man was to be circumcised. In a similar way, baptism is the mark for Christians. To be a Christian is to be baptized.

But circumcision was never meant to be a sign that you were automatically right with God. As Paul writes, “Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised.” What does that mean? It means that the mark of your faith is only a sign, only a marker of what should be there. The mark itself doesn’t make you right with God.

Have you ever gone to a restaurant and found the perfect thing on the menu only to have the waiter tell you they’re out of it? I hate that. I’ve walked out of restaurants before when that happened ‘cause I was there for that particular thing. But the menu is only a sign. It indicates they’ve got burgers or fries or steak or whatever. But until your meal is in front of you and you’re diving in, you really don’t know what they have in the back. They might be out. They might have discontinued it. The menu is only as good as what they’ve actually got in stock.

In the same way, *what matters before God are not the external marks of belief but a living and active faith in our hearts.* Many people in this world are baptized. Some of you became believers or dedicated yourselves to Christ at CrossWay, but you’d already been baptized. But baptism doesn’t provide salvation. It’s a mark of God’s people, what we often call a sign and seal on us. We celebrate baptism; it’s a huge event in someone’s life whether they’re baptized as a tiny baby or an adult. But the mark doesn’t guarantee faith. You know plenty of people who have been baptized who live as if God isn’t there or doesn’t care.

Nothing external does it. Not a Jesus bumper sticker or a T-shirt; not a cross necklace; not a dozen Bibles strewn around the house. What matters is the content of our hearts. Has God regenerated, remade, our hearts so that they is faith in Jesus there? That’s what matters. And that’s the point of Paul’s conversation. Someone is a Jew inwardly, by the state of their heart before God. He goes on and says what matters 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.”

Did you know that God considers each true Christian a Jew? We think of Jews as genetic descendants of Abraham, and we respect them. They were the original people of God; there are great things about that heritage; Paul will talk about them next week. But as far as God is concerned, a true Jew is someone right with Him. The only way to be right with God is to be chosen by God and given the gift of faith in Jesus, to be forgiven of our sins through Jesus’ sacrifice, and made holy – for our hearts to be changed – through the work of the Holy Spirit. Every person who has that faith, who God has declared righteous? We’re now God’s adopted sons and daughters. As far as God is concerned, we are the true children of Abraham and the heirs of His eternal promises to Abraham.

No matter our backgrounds, our heritage, or who we know, we are sinners in the eyes of God. We have broken the law. Even the chosen people of God were disobedient to Him and far away from Him. No one but Jesus measures up to God’s perfect standard. But the good news, because of His perfection, Jesus brings eternal life to all who put their faith and trust in Him. If you don’t yet believe, pray that God might give you that faith. And if you do believe, listen to God’s voice and live as His sons and daughters. When you fail – as we all do – do not deny it and wind up a hypocrite. Admit your sin, reject it, turn it over to God, and know that God loves even the hypocrite who comes to Him in simple faith.