

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

Pastor Adam Parker

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Sermon Title: Signs and Ceremonies

Sermon Text: Romans 2:17-29

Rom. 2:17 ¶ But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God

Rom. 2:18 and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law;

Rom. 2:19 and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness,

Rom. 2:20 an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—

Rom. 2:21 you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal?

Rom. 2:22 You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

Rom. 2:23 You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.

Rom. 2:24 For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”

Rom. 2:25 ¶ For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.

Rom. 2:26 So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?

Rom. 2:27 Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law.

Rom. 2:28 For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.

Rom. 2:29 But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

Main Point: Merely knowing and teaching the truth, or participating in ceremonies is not sufficient to satisfy God's righteous requirements.

Outline:

1. Profession Without Possession (2:17-24)
2. Ritualism Without Regeneration (2:25-29)

Introduction

Paul continues the work of making us see our sin. As I said two weeks ago, talking about sin is nobody's favorite part of sharing the gospel with others, but it is necessary. In the same way that we need the doctor to tell us the truth about our sickness, we need God to show us our sin.

Now, *Paul* is the one doing this. But honestly, any time the Scriptures are opened and God's word gets preached, we *should* have an expectation that something within us will be exposed to the light of our own conscience. We should not see it as normal to hear the word of God preached, and we just sit there indifferent with no sense that this has anything to do with us. "Well that's everyone else" is either a sign that the preaching is not faithful, or else it's a sign that our hearts are hard and full of self-righteousness.

It's biblically right for us to hear what God says about us and to hear something bittersweet. "Yes, I am a sinner." That realization is bitter. "Jesus Christ is a great savior of sinners." That's the sweetest message of all. But we do need the bitter first.

Otherwise, that statement "Jesus saves sinners" will just sound like news for somebody else. Or like a historical fact only. "Caesar crossed the rubicon. Napoleon's army fought at the battle of Waterloo." That sort of thing. These things

should not just seem like mere matters of history, because that's not all that they are. They're deeply personal.

But it is our knowledge of our own sin that *makes* all of this matter to you and me. It's what makes it good news for us.

If someone makes this statement to you: "The firemen are racing to put out a fire," that will sound interesting, but it will not seem important to you, really.

But if I said, "Well actually, it's your house they are racing toward, because it's on fire," you will be alarmed, but you will also be really glad! It's the difference between news and good news! You will suddenly care a bit more, because it matters especially to you.

This is why Romans has to start with the knowledge that it is *our* home that is on fire. That's what Paul was doing in chapter 1 and is still doing in chapter 2. It is our soul that is in danger. Sin is burning down *our* hearts and our souls. If someone is in denial of that, they are in terrible danger! This is Paul pointing to the flames today.

Now, the diagnosis Paul began the argument of the book with isn't finished, because he doesn't just have bad news, but we also resist the bad news at every stretch. We contort ourselves to avoid the conclusion that we need a Savior.

Not only do we resist by retreating into moralism, which Paul confronted two weeks ago (and he did that by showing that we cannot fully measure up) but this week we keep going as he comes after another one of the ways we try to cope with our sin. We may not cope with it by denying it necessarily, but we cope by retreating into externals: external performance, external ceremonies... anything we can do to avoid the heart work and the call to faith that are so integral to the gospel.

So what are the temptations Paul is going to address here in the remainder of chapter two? I want to focus on two things Paul says we are tempted to use to avoid Paul's guilty verdict: First, we settle for profession without possession. And second, we settle for ritualism without regeneration.

Here is the question: what do you tell yourself about yourself and your standing before God? To put it another way, what do you *rely* on? Do you lean on or rely on

something about *yourself* – something you’ve done, something you’ve said, something you’ve claimed, some ceremony you’ve received, some family relationship that you think makes you closer to God?

Or do you fully lean on and rely on Jesus Christ, and him alone? That’s where Paul is leading us. But he knows that sin is clever, and that our own sinful heart will try to take these paths of escape. So let’s look at them and see why they aren’t options.

1. Profession Without Possession (2:17-24)

The first temptation Paul addresses is the temptation of Profession without Possession.

Profession is the thing that we say, the thing that we claim, the thing that we think people should know the most about us. It also has to do with what we teach. What is a professor, but someone who professes to his or her students what life and the world are like? It’s interesting, professors used to be called confessors and in the middle ages that changed and became not someone who confesses the truth, but someone who professes the truth.

And this passage is *filled* with profession language. Look at this. From verses 17 through 24 Paul is addressing the way we talk and think about ourselves: “You call yourself.” “You know,” “You approve,” “You are sure,” “You who teach,” “You preach” “You say,” “You abhor,” “You boast.”

Paul calls this person someone who “relies on the law.” This is a person who has a lawkeeping, law-like mentality. It is the mentality of the legalist, which we will eventually get to. But the mindset of the legalist sees God as fundamentally opposed to him. The legalist doesn’t see God as fatherly, loving, accepting, or warmhearted toward him. Instead, the legalist thinks of God as fundamentally set against him, and always prowling around for a reason to reject the legalist. He is paranoid. And because the legalist is afraid that something will happen to him on a technicality, he thinks that his job is to do something that can perhaps change that.

[By the way, the person who rejects the law (we call that an antinomian) does the same thing. He is also looking for a way to escape God's sharp judgmental gaze. (We'll talk more about this later in Romans chapter 3.) But the Christian perspective and what Paul is going to argue is that the mindset of the legalist is fundamentally wrong. And that legalistic mindset is poisonous.]

Because the legalistic mind, because it doesn't see God as for us, the legalist believes he is the only one and the only thing that can keep God and his judgment at bay. He has to do something so that God will be favorable toward him. And we know Paul is talking about the legalist here, because the person he's talking about here, according to verse 17, "relies on the law." The law is his crutch. The law is his hope. The law is the thing that he lives clinging to.

And so we make sure that we believe the right things, say the right things, hold the right positions, affirm the right theological statements, read the right books, promote the right preachers and writers... and yet isn't Paul telling us that this is not what peace with God looks like, either. Peace with God cannot grow out of the soil of our own hearts. He has to be rooted in God, his grace, and what he will do to give us his peace.

We can say legalism is bad, all the while believing that we have to keep ourselves from God's anger and judgment. It's a curious thing. And Paul is taking issue with the person who has this profession, the words, the affirmation and all that, but isn't actually himself a believer. He relies on the law, but he doesn't have faith. He has faith in himself, in what he does. He boasts in the law.

Yes, Paul is addressing a Jewish audience here, but the problems aren't only for a Jewish audience to face. All of us know what it is to talk one way and to act another. And all of this is a surefire sign that you are a sinner in need of a Savior. But man how easy is it to lean on our profession and the way we talk? To think that because I say things right, or even believe the right things that I'm somehow secure.

On its own, right teaching and good doctrine still don't protect us from the destruction of sin. He's talking to people who rightly affirm and teach what the Scriptures say. "You know his will," Paul says. That's the person he's

talking to. Are you someone who knows God's will? Do you sometimes teach? Do you serve in some public facing way? Paul says, your good theology and doctrine is not the Savior. On its own they won't save or protect you.

And of course you know that Paul's issue is not with good theology. It is with the good theology or profession that is used like it will give you peace.

Well people are in danger of having a performative life where they feel secure and say they are secure, and talk about being secure, when in fact they aren't secure! The point is not to make people insecure, but to make people realize that they are putting their hope in the wrong things.

Look at how Paul gets very personal here. He wants you to be self-aware enough to search your own heart for the hypocrisy which is a sure sign that you're a law-breaker. He's got a test. He's got a diagnostic question for you.

Look at verse 21: "You then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal?" This is actually such an intimate question. It's for each listener to answer for ourselves. Most people won't know this about us, but we will. He's not really dragging anyone out in public here and making them answer. This is a question for YOU to answer in your heart.

Some people are bold in person and will proclaim their innocence, or pretend like something doesn't affect them, but Paul doesn't care what your public performance is, what kind of bold face you put on. This is for YOU to answer in your heart of hearts.

Have you come to God admitting that you are a sinner? Or deep down do you hold onto some goodness, some virtue, something solid within your heart or in your past that you think makes you more pleasing to God than everyone else?

2. Ritualism Without Regeneration (2:25-29)

The second temptation that Paul addresses is ritualism without regeneration.

In verse 25, Paul says, "For circumcision is indeed of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision."

Now, Paul mentions circumcision here, and he says it has real value. In other words, it's not an empty thing that's just a formality.

But what he says here applies to more than just circumcision. He's really just using circumcision as a stand-in for any aspect of the ceremonial or moral law of God that you might be tempted to take shelter behind apart from faith in Christ and the promise of God.

Peter Martyr does a good job of summarizing part of what circumcision meant and why it was of real value:

“Circumcision was given to the Jews as a sign, so that Christ might be understood as one who would be born from human lineage. This sign continually reminded them of the covenant God had made with them, and by it, they professed their obligation to keep the law... Under the Old Testament, circumcision served as a type of baptism and was considered a sacrament of regeneration.”

And so when Paul speaks of circumcision, he's really talking about all obligations that people have to God – whether that is ceremonial or moral. But he does use circumcision as his example. A Jewish person in Paul's day would certainly have been tempted to say, “Well how do I know I have peace with God? I've been circumcised, just like my father and his father before him and his father before him all the way back to Abraham.”

But then Paul says, if you keep one part of that law, but still break another, you've still broken the law. You broke it at one point, so it's all broken. It's not that all sins are equally heinous [they aren't], but they are still all sins. It's tempting for a Jew to look at his lawkeeping and think, “There it is. I got circumcised on the eighth day. I'm a descendant of David [and so on], I memorized massive portions of Scripture. I've got the genetics, the ceremony, and the piety. Therefore, I am a lawkeeper.”

This still has an incredible allure for us today. We look at our heritage, or our history, and feel secure based on that.

My wife gave me permission to share this; but when she was a teenager, she experienced a rebellious period, and a person asked her if she was a

Christian, and her answer was, “well my dad is a pastor.” And the person said, “That’s not what I asked. I asked about *you*. Are *you* a Christian?” Years later she told me that she remembered being shaken by this question. Her answer was focused on the externals, focused on other people, or even something about herself. She had all this religious stuff around her, but her answer as not about Christ as a great savior, it was about her. So simple, but this person had cut through the excuses and the things she was hiding behind and leaning on.

What about you? Are you a Christian? That’s where Paul is really pushing you today. Is there anything that *you* are hiding behind? What are you leaning on that is not Jesus Christ?

When we get to Romans 4:11 we will go more deeply into this, but in that verse, Paul says that circumcision was a sign and seal of God’s covenant to Abraham and his descendants. This is exactly what baptism is now in the New Testament era. The bloodless sign of God’s covenant to Abraham. And because of this, we need to see how what Paul says here about circumcision absolutely applies to those of us who have been baptized as well.

If you are a baptized member of the church or a baptized covenant child you are like the circumcised Jew of Paul’s day in many respects. Like the circumcised person, you bear the sign of the covenant of God, which was physically applied to you. Like the circumcised person, you’ve received a sign which preaches the removal of sin. Like the circumcised person, many of you received this sign soon after you were born. Like the circumcised person, you’ve received a sign that preaches a sermon that proclaims that salvation is by faith alone.

The difference between them and you is that circumcised Jews received a *bloody* sign, and baptism is bloodless, and now the sign is applied to girls as well as boys. Circumcision looked forward to Christ, and baptism looks back to Christ. But everything that Paul says here about circumcision should also challenge us about our baptism.

If someone asks you if you are a Christian, what they want to know is, are you believing in Jesus Christ. They are not asking you a question about your circumcision or baptism. Those things are precious, they’re not empty. They have

value, like circumcision did. And we should remember our baptism, but that baptism is not salvation itself. It is a sign and seal of salvation, but our justification does not happen by baptism, it happens by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Baptism preaches justification by faith to us, but it does not grant justification to us apart from faith.

Paul has spent time here talking about the benefits of the covenant sign. It's a valuable covenant sign that is not salvific *in itself*. It anticipates and points to something deeper. It preaches a sermon of sin being removed, and it underscores God's covenant faithfulness. But Paul is adamant that the external sign itself simply does not achieve these things by itself.

What does verse 28 say? "No one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter."

Let me translate for all of us in our context. Baptism is valuable. It's a sign of God's covenant. But do not hide behind it apart from faith in the Jesus whom your baptism proclaims. "A Christian is not merely one outwardly, nor is baptism outward and physical. But a Christian is one inwardly, and baptism is a matter of the heart."

The conclusion of this is not, "Well I guess baptism doesn't matter," or "I guess we should stop baptizing." No! Preaching in itself doesn't save, either, you know. But that doesn't mean we don't preach. God uses all of these means to call people to faith in himself. So they are valuable. The real conclusion is, listen to the sermon that baptism preaches, and go where it's leading you: "Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved!"

Now, the Scriptures do often take the sign (such as baptism) and speak of it together with what it signifies. So for example, Peter in 1 Peter 3:21, will speak of the judgment that came on the earth and the escape God's people had in the ark, and Peter says this: "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

Peter here speaks of baptism as if it is the thing that baptism preaches and signifies and seals. This is normal for the language of signs. But the church fathers were very insistent on the sign itself not being enough.

Augustine was very clear that the sacrament itself is real and true and objective. If you have been baptized, you have really been baptized. Just like the circumcised person, you have a sign that's been given to you which preaches Jesus Christ, and his removal of your sin by faith alone. But simply receiving the sign does not grant faith nor justification nor any of the other benefits that it preaches if we will not believe. It's a sign of those things, but it does not make those things.

This is not just a later Reformation perspective.

Listen to Augustine in one of his sermons on the gospel of John: "Many who have baptism are not children of God; they have their baptism, but not the virtue of baptism" (Tractates on John, 6.10).

Later, in Augustine's writing *On Faith and Works*, he will make this statement: "It is not the sacrament of baptism that justifies, but faith that works through love, without which even baptism is of no avail" (*On Faith and Works*, ch. 27).

Peter, as well as the church fathers, were secure enough in the sacraments and what they meant that they were willing to talk about the sign in the way signs should be spoken of: as something that pointed beyond itself. And yet they knew that a Jew is not just one outwardly. And a Christian is also not just one who has been baptized, but who is saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Here is what the Reformer Peter Martyr says about this passage:

"[Paul's] purpose was to show that even external signs, if piety and holiness are absent, will not be considered by God. And conversely, that if the Gentiles sincerely sought God and lived rightly, their lack of circumcision would not harm them. This shows how little external things matter if they are taken by themselves. And yet, in our time, there has been such an error that people have placed their whole hope of salvation in meaningless practices, repeating prayers in a foreign language, undertaking pilgrimages, and fasting in a careless and superstitious way. Some have even gone so far

as to attribute the remission of sins to these things! The prophets constantly declare that God rejects, hates, and detests worship that lacks faith and piety.” (Romans Commentary on 2:25)

Think about this: How strange would it be if all the things that the Scriptures deny to circumcision would suddenly now be true of baptism:

“Circumcision isn’t merely outward (but baptism can be).

“Circumcision does not justify (but baptism does).

“Circumcision doesn’t bring peace with God (but baptism does).”

Hopefully you would agree, that would be ridiculous. At their core both of these things are sacraments which preach Jesus Christ. Paul is so opposed to people who are living a superficial obedience that it would be wild for him to be telling us, “In the Christian era, you can live obsessed with the externals and not really take hold of these things by faith.”

The same is true of the Lord’s Supper. It’s tempting to think that because we put a bit of bread and wine in our mouth that we are saved. To think that salvation is just a shallow external practice, but that God could ever be pleased with us apart from faith.

If I might go back to Augustine just a bit more on this, he says in a sermon on John,

- “The sacrament is one thing, the power of the sacrament is another” (Tractates on John, 26.11).
- And then he says this in another sermon: “Many receive from the altar and die...Eat spiritually, not just sacramentally” (Sermon 227).
- “Why prepare your teeth and stomach? Believe, and you have eaten” (Tractates on John, 25.12).

You see, it turns out true participation in the Lord’s Supper is done with the heart, not the stomach. This is why we say that the Lord’s Supper is a sacrament of faith.

Just because the thing itself doesn’t save doesn’t mean it doesn’t have value, though.

Any time a ceremony or sign is given, we will be tempted to keep it all on the surface without going deeper, where God is really sending us with it. The sacrament has real grace, when we partake by faith. The Lord's Supper has real grace when we receive it by faith in Christ. I talk about the importance of faith every time I fence the table here. Baptism has real grace when we receive the one it is sending us to: Jesus Christ.

We can see how powerful the temptation here is, because Paul – a man who is circumcised, who bears the sign of the covenant of God – is here putting pressure especially pointedly on his Jewish readers to challenge them whether they think their circumcision can save them.

The externals of religion can point you to the salvation of God, but in themselves they cannot bring you peace. I was baptized so many times as a teenager, each time hoping that it would finally be real. But those baptisms were not magic, and they did not achieve my salvation. They did point me to the savior, and I now look back realizing they could have dunked or sprinkled me hundreds of times and I would not have been more or less saved.

Conclusion

Chapter 1 was Paul going after the pagans and showing them from their lives and the consequences of how they lived that the wrath of God was and is real. Then this chapter was Paul coming to religious people – people like you and me, and saying, “You cannot hide without faith behind sacraments or ceremonies or family heritage or works or anything else.”

The question is not whether you've received the external signs. The real question is, do you use those signs as excuses not to go where the sign points? Do you believe the sermon that those signs preach?

Paul's mission here is fairly simple: he is forcing us to notice our double standards and face them head-on. Listen to the message of guilt that they preach to us. He is telling us that the externals and performances cannot and will not save us. They are good. They are signs and seals of the benefits of salvation just like circumcision

was. They preach a true and glorious message. But we must not only do these things outwardly.

Are you a Christian? I'm not asking if you're baptized. I'm not asking if you take the Lord's Supper. I'm not asking if you make it to church most Sundays or if you give to the offering. I'm asking if you're a *Christian*. This is what it comes down to: Will you believe in Jesus Christ? If you are religious, will you forsake surface-level religiosity and actually come to Jesus Christ, receiving and resting in him alone for your peace, life, and salvation?

Let's pray.