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The Roman Road: From Religious Behavior to Internal Transformation

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Romans 2:25-28 (ESV)

For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.

Matthew 23:1-12 (ESV)

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Well, God is most worthy of our praise, glory, and honor. All praise, glory, and honor go to Him. The Scripture says, as we open His Word today, we're returning to the Roman road: Paul's letter to the believers in Rome. And we've covered his greeting to those in Rome. He's never been there. It's about 57 A.D. he's writing this letter with a scribe penning these words for him. He's gone into his greeting. He's told him how much he loves him. He's told him about his passion to come and share the good news of Jesus with him. And then literally, he begins into the good news describing the bad news first. And we've looked at much of the bad news already. At the end of Romans chapter one, he describes the outright sinfulness of people

who rebel against God and move away from him into real, uh, obvious immorality. And then he describes a judgmental heart at the beginning of Romans chapter two, and how a critical, judgmental heart is just as sinful as an immoral heart. And now we get into the latter part of Romans two into the beginning of Romans three. And Paul starts to describe now how religiosity, a spirit of religiosity, can lead to religious behaviors that may seem good and beneficial, and many of which probably are. But these behaviors themselves are not God's goal for us. His real goal is internal transformation, and religious behaviors can miss the mark just as much as a judgmental heart or even outright immorality.

And so we pick this up here in Romans chapter two, where Paul describes the outward behavior of the Jewish people, of adhering to this instruction to be circumcised. And of course, that's an outward marking of being Jewish, being an insider in God's family and in the New Covenant. In the New Testament, God is rolling us over into a different way, a different kind of circumcision. Paul describes here not an external one, but a circumcision of the heart. He is encouraging us to move beyond religious behavior into spiritual transformation. In Romans two verse 28, he says, "For no one who is a Jew, an insider spiritually, who is merely one outwardly through external markings, but a Jew is one who is one inwardly and has experienced the circumcision of the heart, a circumcision by the Spirit of God, not by the letter of the law." And this person then receives praise not from man, but from God himself. Now, as I've studied this section of Paul's letter to the believers in Rome, I've identified at least three overarching themes. Now, there's more than that, but I want you to grasp this three overarching themes that God is inspiring Paul to write about regarding religious behavior. And the first theme is this: it's true God's ways and his moral laws are perfect, and they should be the measuring stick by which we should all judge ourselves.

God's law is perfect and right. I mean, the Scripture lifts this up again and again. Psalm 19, verses seven through 11 says, "The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy and making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. They bring justice. They bring righteousness to us. We long for this, friends. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the Lord are firm and all of them are righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold. They're sweeter than honey, than the honey from the honeycomb by them. We are warned in keeping them God's ways. God's laws. There is great reward and we are judged by his law. Religious people are right in knowing the law of God and knowing that all people are judged by the law of God. Romans two verses 12 and 13 Paul says it this way: 'all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. It is not

those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law of God who will be declared righteous.'

There is a judgment based on God's perfect standards and his laws, and we're talking about the initial law being given of the Ten Commandments and those ten moral absolutes that God has given us. And then, of course, that's changed in the New Testament, all of the law is summed up in two laws, but we're judged by the law. Religious people are right in knowing this. God's law is written on all our hearts. Paul wrote in verse 15, our consciences, it's in our thoughts, and we're accountable to it. So the first theme is this: Knowing God's law is good, and knowing that we're judged by God's law is good. And this is a part of religious behavior, religious teaching, and religious instruction in the world. But the second theme for religious people is this: many of us then have a propensity to want to appear like we're good, law-abiding people before God. We're good and right and religious and moral in our behavior, and we have a tendency to want to cover up, rationalize, or hide those areas where we're not perfect, where we don't measure up. We often hide our own sin, our own misgivings, our own shortcomings. We like to appear spiritual and good. In verses 17 through 23, Paul says this: "Now you, if you call yourself a Jew, an insider, you know God's law, you know his standards.

And if you rely on the law and boast in God, and if you know his will and approve of what is superior, you agree that this is all good because you are instructed by the law yourself. If you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light to those who are in the dark, and instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have 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 boast in the law? Do you dishonor God by breaking the law yourself in any way?" Paul is poking at here a spirit of superior religiosity. He's highlighting the fact that for many of us, when we get on board with God's ways and he starts to instruct us in our lives, at a certain point, it becomes uncomfortable enough for us that we'd rather actually look out at the world and evaluate the world based on God's laws than ourselves. A simple way to say it is Paul is basically telling them it's easier to use God's Word as a set of binoculars rather than a mirror. It's easier to look out closely at other people's lives and evaluate them through God's standards, than to look in a mirror and evaluate ourselves and see our own shortcomings through the Scripture.

But this is what Paul is addressing here. He's confronting the spirit of religiosity, and he's encouraging us to be careful in being pompous in our spirituality, because God's standard is

perfection. I mean, there's no question you have to keep every part of the law to be righteous. You have to do everything right before God to be perfect in his eyes, to be accepted before him. In Matthew five verse 48, Jesus said, "Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect." And Jesus was very clear to us about how he felt about the spirit of superior religiosity. We see it in Matthew 23 when he said to the crowds and his disciples, "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat, you must be careful to do everything they tell you, but do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them." Later in Matthew 23, Jesus turned to the Pharisees and spoke of them directly when he said, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside he's speaking of them.

They are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee," he said, "first clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside will be clean." Also, "Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees!" he says again, "you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs which look beautiful on the outside, but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous, but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." And so Paul is warning us, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that human beings have a tendency to, when they encounter God's laws, feel uncomfortable because we're not perfect, and then we want to appear more righteous than we are. We want to do religious behaviors that can literally become abusive to those around us. And we see in Jesus' life this. Is detestable to him. I can't think of any group of people that Jesus was harder on than the religiously superior, sort of arrogant, pompous people he ran into. So here's the overarching themes Paul is addressing in this section of Rome when he's talking about the bad news and how people's hearts deceive them, and how we miss God's mark. He's addressing the idea of religious superiority, and he's saying, yes, you're right.

God's ways and his morals are true. And they're they're right, they're perfect. And many of us have a propensity to want to appear like we're all doing well before God. Like everything is good with us, and we cover up those things that we know inside of us are missing the mark. We're ashamed of them, and we hide them. But the third thing he reveals here is it is true. No matter how slick we appear on the outside, none of us have even come close to keeping God's perfect law. None of us have. We have a deeply seated internal heart problem in Romans three. He will say it this way: there is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands, no one who even seeks God of their own fruition. All have turned away. There is no one who does good, not even one. And of course, the famous verse Romans 3:23, where

Paul says, "for all have sinned, all have missed the mark and fallen short of the glory of God." And this should at any point, at any time in our lives, be a reminder to us not to have a superior attitude toward others. In First Samuel chapter 16, we see that Samuel the prophet is to pick a new king after Saul was disqualified because of the condition of his heart, and he's at a man named Jesse's house, where God has sent him to consider his sons and evaluate his sons to see which one could be king.

And one of them seems very likely to be a king standing before Samuel. And God says to Samuel, "do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." At the root of Christianity is the cleansing of our hearts, friends, an internal cleansing by the blood of Jesus. This is the great love of God who has come to do for us what we couldn't do for ourselves, fulfill the law in us, and give us a heart that wants to follow his ways and then declare us righteous through Jesus' perfect keeping of the law, not our own. And so I want to give you some encouragement today, in this spirit of religiosity that permeates our world, I want to invite you to shun it with three prayers. And these prayers come really right out of the scriptures. The first prayer is this: to avoid being a sinful, hypocritical, superior religious person, pray this way. Psalm 139: "search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting."

It's the prayer inviting God to search our hearts, not evaluate our behaviors, but what is driving our behaviors. Lord, what's true about us on the inside? Search us on the inside. And then as you expose things that need dealt with there, we're going to agree with you, Lord, that they're wrong and we're going to confess them to you, and we're going to repent from them. And then comes this next prayer: "search me, God, and then cleanse me." This prayer comes right out of Psalm 51: "Cleanse me with hyssop, Lord, and I will be clean. Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love, according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity. Cleanse me from my sin, for I know my transgressions. You've shown them to me. My sin is always before me, against you, and you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight. So you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge. Surely," the psalmist says, "I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Hide your face from my sins, father. Blot out my iniquities. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me." Search me, God, and then cleanse me. And then this third prayer, this third prayer comes out

of Isaiah chapter 6, where the prophet Isaiah comes face to face with the purity and the holiness and the righteousness of God.

And he's undone. And he sees that he is a sinful man. He declares that he is an unclean man with unclean lips among a people of unclean lips. And then God comes and touches his lips and purifies him, heals him, and says, "whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" And then Isaiah said, "here I am. Send me." What is happening here is after he's been searched and then cleansed, Isaiah makes himself available to be used by God. "Search me, oh God, cleanse me and use me."

I close with the prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi. Search me, oh God, cleanse me and then use me. Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is doubt, faith. Where there is despair, hope. Where there is darkness, light, and where there is sadness, joy. O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved, as to love. For it is in giving that we receive. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. In Jesus name, Amen.