

**The Book of Romans**  
**False Claims and Empty Rituals (Part 3)**

Romans 2:25-29

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Well I invite you to turn with me this morning, as we continue our journey through Paul's letter to the Romans, for the last time to Romans 2. We have made our way through this wonderful chapter and today we finish discovering all that the Apostle Paul has for us here in this great chapter.

Those of you who know me and know our family know that before we came here 12 years ago, we were some 16 years in Los Angeles, ministering there at Grace Community Church in that area. And there are many things that marked me from my years in Los Angeles. Some of them eternal and spiritual. Others of them, not so much. One lasting mark from those years that may not be eternal, although maybe we will eat this in eternity, is that I love sushi. Now, if you're familiar with sushi you know that, sort of, the gateway drug of sushi is called the California Roll. That's how, you know, you get suckered in to sushi and all that's involved. And the California roll is simply crab meat wrapped in rice and seaweed and that's how you begin to like sushi, is you start there.

I remember being shocked when I discovered some time after I got into this habit that there is no crab meat whatsoever in a California Roll. Did you know that? It's all imitation crab. It's made from ground up whitefish. As one writer described it, it's, sort of, the sushi version of the hot dog. You know, all the parts are there, but you don't know exactly what parts are there. That's a case of mislabeling. How can you call crab meat something that isn't crab meat?

Another sad case of the mislabeling of food, and I'm really going to make some of you wish you hadn't come this morning, I'm going to destroy a habit, the Oreo. I know, it's a sad thing isn't it, a favorite of many of you. I hate to tell you this, but the creme center filling of an Oreo actually contains absolutely no cream. It's made up, primarily, of vegetable oils and soy. Did I just spoil your next Oreo treat or what?

Mislabeling. The food industry has faced more serious labeling issues than those. Those are a bit on the humorous side, but you may remember in the news back in 2013, Europe the, sort of, the culinary center of the world was rocked when it discovered that many products from across 13 different European countries, products that claimed to be beef, were in fact beef blended with some mixture of horsemeat.

We live in a world where things are not often as they seem. Where things are often mislabeled. As I thought about that, it occurred to me that that is not merely true when it comes to food or products. We live in a world filled with people who are mislabeled. They are not what they claim to be or what they seem to be. It's this very problem that Paul is concerned about at the end of Romans 2. There are people who proudly wear the label that says, I belong to the true God, I belong to the people of God, but, in fact, they don't. This is where we come today in our study of Paul's letter to the Romans.

Now, let me remind you where he begins. Paul is explaining the gospel that he preached to the Roman churches, churches he didn't found, churches he'd never visited, because he wanted them, when he came, to support his new ministry in Spain and in Western Europe. After 25 years in Eastern Europe he was beginning a new emphasis and he wanted them to partner with him, and so they had a right to know the gospel he preached. And so he explains it to them and that's why we have this magnificent letter to the Romans, why it's so different than so many of the rest of Paul's letters.

Now, as he unfolds the gospel that he preached to these Roman churches, he begins in chapter 1 by showing them that pagans everywhere, those who worship false gods, need the gospel. But quickly we learn it's not just pagans who need the gospel, the good news found in Jesus Christ, even those who claim to know the true God need the gospel as well.

Now, I hope you have enough discernment to understand that on this Lord's Day, churches across this country and literally around the world are filled with people who profess to know the true God through His Son our Lord Jesus Christ, but who, in fact, do not have a true saving relationship with Him. I know, as a pastor and one who shepherds people all the time, that, sadly, there are people here this morning, a number of people here this morning, who claim to know God but whose hearts deny that reality.

Now, in the first century this group that claimed to know the true God, not some idol but the true God of the Bible, this group was made up primarily of the Jews. Everywhere Paul went, this is where he began. With very few exceptions, his first evangelistic enterprise was in the synagogue, the Jewish synagogue, and there he would present the gospel. His first mission with the Jewish people was to show them that in spite of their nationality, in spite of their profession of faith, in spite of their many spiritual examples, in spite of their knowledge of the Bible, in spite of their rituals, they too were sinners who desperately needed the gospel, the good news that God sent to us through His Son.

Now, in Romans 2:1 and running all the way through chapter 3 verse 8, we have a unique privilege, because we get to, as it were, sit in one of those Jewish synagogues and listen to the Apostle Paul present the gospel to the Jewish people to whom he ministered. It's as if we're, sort of, looking over his shoulder in these chapters, watching him communicate the gospel to these people. And, of course, before he gets to the good news he has to first lay out the bad news and

his approach is to confront and to destroy all the fortresses in which their false hopes of heaven rested. And we've watched him do that here in chapter 2.

In verses 1 to 16 we saw him make it clear that knowing what is sinful and condemning it in others is not going to allow you to escape God's wrath. In other words, he was attacking their confidence in their basic morality. They thought, because they didn't do all the things the pagans did, they weren't as bad as they were, that that meant they were okay. But morality is a false hope because it falls desperately short of God's standard, which is perfection.

Now, in verses 17 to 24 of chapter 2 Paul disabuses them of their second false hope, another fortress where their hope was built, and that was having and knowing the Scripture. And he tells them that having the Scripture, knowing the Scripture, will not allow you to escape God's wrath either. Knowing the Bible is a false hope because God demands that you practice the Bible.

Now, we're in the midst of studying Paul's assault on a third false hope, or fortress, that the Jews and all moral religious people who are unconverted have, and that is this, claiming faith in God and performing religious rituals will not allow you to escape God's future judgment. This is the point of the last paragraph of chapter 2. Let's read it together. Romans 2, beginning in verse 25,

For indeed circumcision is a value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter *of the Law* and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law? 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.

Now, what we learn from the paragraph I just read to you is that religious rituals and the profession of faith that accompanies those rituals do not mean that you truly belong to God and that, therefore, you will escape the future judgment. You see, the Jews put their hope in their circumcision, that sign that they were the physical descendants of Abraham. But as we learned, God intended circumcision, primarily, to make a spiritual point and that was a picture of their need for spiritual cleansing, for spiritual renewal at the heart level. It was supposed to be an outward sign of an inward change, a change that only God Himself could produce.

Circumcision symbolized personal depravity, yes, but it also symbolized the need for, the expectation of, the desire for, divine cleansing. Sadly, the Jews had substituted the physical for the spiritual. They had substituted the outward sign for the internal reality. They had placed their confidence of salvation in the outward sign of circumcision rather than in the spiritual

reality it was supposed to picture and it could never contribute to their salvation. That's what Paul explains in these verses. As those Jewish people sit in those synagogues and hear Paul, Paul anticipates this reaction, and he destroys their hope in circumcision.

He says, basically, there are two reasons that rituals can never save. We looked at the first one last week, because you still need perfect obedience. If you are counting on a ritual to save you then it doesn't stop there. In addition to that ritual, you will also need to add perfect obedience to God's Law.

Now, I noted for you last week that Paul's argument in verses 25 to 27, which is where we learn this, is greatly condensed, truncated. There are even underlying assumptions that are crucial to his argument. So together, last week, we unpacked his argument from these three verses. Let me just remind you of the flow of his argument. A couple of them are understood, they are assumptions lying beneath the surface, and then he gets to the point in the last two of them. Let me just remind you.

First of all, number one, there are only two potential paths to being right with God, only two paths you can choose to try to be right with God. The first path is justification by works, that is, by your own effort, by something you do, by your goodness, by your merit, by your righteousness. The second way is justification by faith in Christ. That's it. Those are the only two potential paths. And everybody here this morning is on one of those two paths. You have chosen to try to be right with God based on one of those two paths.

Number two, in the flow of his argument, we discovered that trusting in a ritual for your salvation, either in part, it's part of what makes you right with God, or it's all, maybe you're putting your entire confidence in some ritual, if that's where you are, then you are pursuing path one, you are pursuing justification by works, because you're saying, something I do is going to contribute to my salvation. Paul makes that clear in Galatians 5. If you choose a ritual as part of what's going to make you right with God, then you have chosen the path of trying to be right with God based on your own efforts.

The third point in Paul's flow of the argument here, and this is in verses 25 and 26, if you want to be justified by works, if that's the path you've chosen, then good luck with that, because you don't just get to keep a ritual. You've now got to keep all of God's Law perfectly, all of it perfectly. Notice verse 25, "For indeed circumcision is of value." If you want circumcision to benefit you in salvation, then it's only of value if you practice the Law. You've got to keep the Law too. This is what he says in Galatians 5 as well.

"But if you are a transgressor of the Law," that's not like a horribly wicked person, that means if you break God's Law, once, "if you are a transgressor of the Law, then your circumcision has become uncircumcision." In other words, if you sin, if you break God's Law once, then your

ritual just lost any effort, any merit, any work to accomplish your salvation, because it's of no value unless you keep God's Law perfectly, all of it.

And the fourth part of the flow of his argument here is, if you failed to keep God's Law perfectly, you are guilty of breaking it all and will face God's wrath at the judgment. In verse 27 he talks about the Jews being judged. They thought they were going to be okay, verse 3 of chapter 2, they thought they would escape the wrath of God, but here he tells them, no, that's not true; you're going to face judgment.

Paul's point in these three verses is that if you want a ritual of any kind to contribute in any way to your salvation, you are pursuing salvation by works. And if you're pursuing justification by works, nothing less than perfect obedience will do. You must keep the whole Law and you must keep it perfectly to be saved. And, of course, here's the bad news. If you choose path one, if you choose justification by your own works, you're never going to be right with God. Look at chapter 3 verse 20, "by the works of the Law," by my efforts to obey God's Law, "no flesh," no one, "will be justified in His sight; for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin."

This is what Paul is driving at in chapter 2. He's saying, listen, you don't have a prayer. Based on your own works, your own efforts, you don't have a chance. You need the gospel. You need the good news. Everyone needs a right standing before God, but the only way to get it is to receive it as a gift from God based on the work of His Son Jesus Christ. It's a gift to those who repent and believe in His Son. Religion and rituals can never save, Paul says, because if that's the path you choose, you will still need perfect obedience.

Now, today we come to Paul's second reason that it's foolish to think you know God because of professions of faith and religious rituals that accompany those professions. This is in verses 28 and 29, and the second reason is because you will still need a new heart. You can keep rituals all you want, but your real problem isn't external, your real problem, my real problem, it's our hearts; you'll still need a new heart.

You see, the real evidence, this is what Paul is going to explain to us, the real evidence of a relationship with God is not that you are a basically moral person, or that you know the Scripture, or that you made a profession a faith, or that you've been baptized, or that you've participated in spiritual activities and other rituals. The real evidence is nothing on the outside, because all of that can be faked. All of that can be imitated.

The real evidence of a relationship to God is your heart. It's what's going on inside of you, in the real you. In verses 28 and 29 Paul comes to this core issue. The Jews needed to hear this. And all religious people who are trusting in their own works need to hear this. His argument is, you can best determine the genuineness of your relationship to God by what goes on inside of you, in the real you, in your heart.

Now, why would this matter? Because this is God's chief concern. This is always God's chief concern. Your heart. Go back up to chapter 2 verse 6, Paul here details for us the standard of God's judgment at the future judgment. He says God is just; "HE'LL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS." Now, you read that and you might think, well, it's just what I do that matters to God. Not at all, go back to the verse before, "it's because of your stubborn and unrepentant heart that you're storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and the revelation of the judgment of God." It's about your heart. That's what God going to look at.

You see, "man," we're told in 1 Samuel 16, "looks on the outward appearance, but God looks," where? "At the heart." He knows you the way you know yourself. In fact, He knows you better than you know yourself, inside, where no one but you sees. This is God. Second Chronicles 6:30, "God," we read, "You will render to each according to all his ways," but not just outward deeds, "whose heart You know for You alone know the hearts of the sons of men." Proverbs 21:2, "Every man's way is right in his own eyes." Boy, is that true. There isn't a single person here, there isn't a single person anywhere, who doesn't think they're right. "But the LORD weighs the hearts."

Proverbs 24:12 is dealing with the fact, in the context, that we're supposed to rescue those who are rushing headlong to destruction, those who are locked in sin and are going to destroy themselves. And the Proverb says, "If you say, 'See, we didn't know this,'" God we didn't know it, we didn't know this was happening, as an excuse, "Does He not consider *it* who weighs the hearts? And does He not know *it* who keeps your soul? And will He not render to man according to his work?" In other words, what goes on in your heart, God sees that, He records that, He knows that, and on the day of judgment it's the heart that will be the issue. Jeremiah 17:10, "I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds."

Now, why would God search the heart? Because, remember what the proverb says, "out of the heart flows all the springs of life," the issues of life. Your heart sets the course for everything you say and everything you do. Think about the words you say. Jesus said in Matthew 12:34, "How can you, being evil," in your heart, "speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart." Listen, if you find yourself pouring forth angry, bitter, vitriolic words to the people around you, that's your heart.

Same thing is true with our actions. Turn over to Mark 7. Our Lord makes this crystal clear. The Pharisees were concerned that He and His disciples were not ceremonially washing their hands before they ate, that that was somehow going to defile them before God, and Jesus says this in Mark 7:21,

*"For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, [out of your heart, out of who you really are, you produce evil thoughts and so do I, and then out of those thoughts come evil acts,] fornications [which is all kind of sexual sin],*

thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, *as well as* deceit, sensuality, envy, slander [*that's name calling*], pride [*or arrogance*], and foolishness. All these evil things [*and we could say, every evil thing, every evil act, every evil thought*] proceeds from within [*out of the heart*].”

This is why the heart matters.

Now go back to Romans 2. In chapter 2 verses 28 and 29 we come to the core of Paul’s concern with the Jews and with all external religion with its false claims and its empty ritual. Notice, in verse 28 Paul makes two negative affirmations and then in verse 29 he follows with two corresponding positive affirmations. They make a unit, but let’s take them as he gives them. First of all, let’s look at the negative affirmations he makes, and we could summarize verse 28 this way, the evidence of belonging to God’s true people is not external. Look at verse 28, “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly.” Now, notice first that little connector word “For” that begins verse 28. That shows us that Paul is giving us here the reasons why what he said in verses 25 to 27 is true. He has just said, look, at the judgment your Jewishness, your circumcision, isn’t going to matter. And now he’s going to explain why, “For,” because, “he is not a Jew who is one outwardly.”

Now, clearly he’s not talking about ethnicity. If you were born with Jewish blood, you’re Jewish. That doesn’t change. He’s not talking about that. Instead, Paul is arguing that being physically Jewish, being a physical descendant of Abraham, does not necessarily mean that you belong to God’s chosen people. Let me say that again. Being a physical descendant of Abraham does not necessarily mean that you belong to the true people of God. In fact, in chapter 10 he’s going to use the example of Jacob and Esau. Both were physical descendants of Abraham, but one belonged to God’s true people and the other didn’t.

Now, the word outwardly here means, that which is visible. Being a spiritual descendant of Abraham, that is, belonging to God’s true people, is not about what’s outward, it’s not a matter of externals. Now, you and I sitting here with 2,000 years of church history behind us, it’s easy for us to look at that and go, yeah, right. But imagine Paul, in a synagogue, teaching a bunch of Jewish people in the first century, and he says to them, listen, the fact that you are a descendant of Abraham doesn’t mean that you necessarily belong to God’s true people, that you’re one of the chosen people. This would have been shocking. But it shouldn’t have been, because Paul’s going to argue later in Romans that this is exactly what the Old Testament teaches.

In fact, turn over to Romans 9. Look at verse 6, Paul is dealing with the problem that not all the Jewish people had believed in Jesus as their Messiah. Why is that? Verse 6, “it’s not as though the Word of God has failed,” it’s not like God’s promise has failed, “For they are,” here’s a key statement,

For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all truly God's children because they are Abraham's descendants, [*and then he quotes the Old Testament*] but: "THROUGH ISAAC [*not Ishmael*] YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED."

Clearly, not all the descendants of Abraham were part of God's chosen people and case example number one is Ishmael. You say, but yeah, wait a minute, is that really a fair example Paul? I mean, after all, Ishmael is the product of a relationship between Abraham and Hagar. Isaac is the product of a relationship between Abraham and Sarah. Okay, Paul anticipates that. Go down to verse 10. Let me give you another example he says, "there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac." So here you have one man, one woman, in the chosen line, having twins, they're born at the same time. But verse 13 says, "JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED." In other words, Jacob is part of My true people, My chosen people, and Esau, also a descendant of Abraham and Isaac, is not.

This is a remarkable statement Paul makes, but he's not alone. Our Lord makes the same argument during His ministry. You remember in John 8:39, the Jews are talking to Jesus, "and they said to Him, 'Abraham is our Father.' And Jesus said to them," not really, "'If you are Abraham's children, do the deeds of Abraham.'" And He goes on to tell them in verse 44 of that same chapter, you're not descendants of Abraham in the true spiritual sense, "'You are of your father," whom? "'The devil, and the desires of your father you will do.'"

Now, look again at verse 28 of Romans 2, "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly," we've looked at that, but notice the second negative affirmation he makes, "nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh." You see, the sign that you belong to the Abrahamic Covenant is not merely an external ritual that is performed on the body. I mean, after all, the Egyptians and other ancient peoples practiced circumcision.

Paul makes a remarkable statement about this in Ephesians 2:11. He's writing to a church that's made up primarily of Gentiles and he says this, "you, the Gentiles in the flesh, are called 'Uncircumcision,'" and then he identifies the Jews this way, "by the so called 'Circumcision.'" What does that mean? It means they may be physically circumcised, but the spiritual reality that's intended to picture isn't present at all. So they're not real, they're the "so called 'Circumcision.'" It's not the real deal.

True circumcision is not physical and outward. It's the circumcision of the heart. Deuteronomy 30:6, "the LORD your God will circumcise your heart to love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, so that you may live." That's what circumcision was supposed to picture, that radical change of the heart that God performs where a person is changed and they begin to love God and long to serve Him and worship Him and live for Him.



So, let me wrap up verse 28 this way. I want you to listen carefully. Understanding this will make a lot of the Scripture clear. It will also make contemporary issues clear. Most of the ethnic descendants of Abraham throughout history and today have not been God's true people. They have not been God's chosen people in that sense. Instead, as we will see in Romans later, and as we see throughout the Old Testament, it was just a remnant. It was just a small number who were God's true people.

Now, that brings us to verse 29 and the positive affirmations that Paul makes. And we can encapsulate verse 29 this way, the evidence of belonging to God's true people is not external, instead, it's your heart. Look at verse 29, "But he is a Jew who is one inwardly." Belonging to God's true people is a matter of the heart. Obviously, inwardly here is the opposite of verse 28's outwardly, but the word itself speaks of that which is hidden, that which is in secret. In this context it's referring to what you are in your true inner person, where no one else can see.

Belonging to the true people of God, Paul says, is not about your nationality, it's not about your religion, your knowledge of the Scripture, your basic morality, your external obedience to God's Law, your rituals performed; it's about your heart. The one who truly belongs to God's people has been changed at the core of his true inner self, a radical transformation.

Notice, he goes on in verse 29 to say, "circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter." He says the real sign of the covenant is not a ritual performed on the body, it's about what God has done to your heart. Now, I've talked about the heart quite a bit, but what does that mean? When the Bible speaks of the heart, what's it describing? I like the way the leading Greek lexicon defines it. Listen to this, "Your heart is the center and source of the whole inner life." It's the center and source of your entire inner life. In other words, it's you, your heart is you. Strip away the body and your actions, what you're left with is the real you. That's your heart. Your heart thinks, your heart feels, your heart has motives, your heart makes decisions, it's you. That's your heart.

And the evidence that you belong to God's people is when the core of the person you are is cleansed and changed by God, and you can't do this, nor can I. You can't change your heart. I can't change my heart. Proverbs 20:9 says, "Who can say, 'I have cleansed my heart, I am pure from my sin'?" What's the obvious answer? No one. No one can say that. The Spirit of God has to accomplish this radical renewal of the heart. That's what Paul says here. Look at verse 29, "circumcision is that which is of the heart." Well, how in the world do you get a circumcised heart? How do you get this radical change to the person that you are? Notice, it's "by the Spirit." It's accomplished by the work of God's Spirit at the very center of your person.

Last time we looked at John 3 and in John 3 we're told that Jesus tells Nicodemus, you must be born, what? Again or born "from above." And then later in verse 8 of that chapter He says, you must be "born of the Spirit." The Spirit has to so radically change you that it's like you were

born a second time. It's like you become a different person. That's what you need. In Titus 3:5-6, "He saved us, by the renewal of the Holy Spirit."

Now, notice how at the end of verse 29 Paul contrasts the Spirit with the letter. He says, "circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the work of the Spirit, it's not by the letter." What he means there is, we're not talking about external obedience to the letter of God's Law. You see, there's a huge difference between those who are physically circumcised, who can check the box and say I was circumcised on the eighth day, that's what the Law says, and those who have a changed heart. Big difference. By the way, that difference still exists.

Turn over to a foundationally key passage on this. Turn over to Philippians 3. I told you, we'll come back to this section of Scripture many times in the coming weeks and months because, outside of Romans, it is one of the clearest passages on justification by faith. Philippians 3, verse 1 running down through verse 11, is all about justification by faith alone. And Paul begins the chapter by saying, listen, to write about justification again, that's not a trouble to me, and it's good for you to rehearse again, justification by faith.

And here's why. Because there are enemies of justification out there. Verse 2, "Beware of the dogs." This is a reference to the Judaizers. These were people who were Jewish, who claimed to believe in Jesus as their Messiah, who had faith in Christ, who wanted to be saved by grace, but they wanted to add to that, circumcision and keeping the Law. To be saved you had to do all of that. And Paul says, they're no better than Gentiles. They called the Gentiles dogs and Paul says, they're the dogs. "Beware of the evil workers." They claimed to be workers of righteousness, they kept God's Law, and he said, that's not true, they're evil workers.

And then he identifies them this way, it's shocking, verse 2, "beware of the false circumcision." There's a word play in the Greek text, but the point is they're not the real deal. They have physical circumcision, but it's not what God meant. They're the false circumcision. And then he says, now remember, he's writing to this church in Philippi composed primarily of Gentiles, and he says, "we are the true circumcision." Being a true follower of Jesus Christ is what circumcision was supposed to picture, a heart that has been radically cleansed and changed.

And then he describes believers. Notice how he describes them, "who worship by the Spirit of God." That is, our whole lives are devoted to serving and worshipping God. We offer the sacrifice of our lives to Him. And "we glory," or we boast, "in Christ Jesus." Our confidence is in Jesus alone and therefore He is our boast. We glory in Him. And he concludes in verse 3 by saying, true believers are those who "put no confidence in the flesh." In other words, not one ounce of your confidence of heaven rests in anything in you. That's what Paul is saying.

So go back to Romans 2. Notice how he ends verse 29. Having said that we need the circumcision of the heart that only the Spirit can do, it's not just obeying the letter of the Law, a person who is like this, a person who has experienced this change, "his praise is not from men,

but from God.” It’s possible here that Paul intends a word play on the Hebrew word from which the word Jew comes. It comes from the name Judah and the name Judah in Hebrew comes from a word which means praise. And so he’s very possibly saying real praise doesn’t come from being a Jew, it comes from this kind of change.

And it’s not praise from men. You see, when Jewish people in that culture, and still today, circumcise their children, they are praised by men. But Paul says, at the future judgment the one true God will reserve His praise for those sinners whose hearts the Spirit of God has changed. He will praise, not something we have done, but something the Spirit of God has done in us.

Now, how should we apply this passage? I mean, at first glance it appears 2,000 years and a million miles from where we are. How do we apply this passage? There are three points of application I want you to get and these are very important.

First application, this isn’t for everyone here, it’s just for those who may be Jewish people who have not believed in Jesus of Nazareth as your Messiah. I must tell you today what the Rabbi Paul who studied under the great Rabbi Gamaliel told his Jewish audiences in the first century, your circumcision, both the right and the profession of faith it represents, will not deliver you from God’s future judgment. Your only hope is found in believing the good news brought to us through His eternal Son, Jesus Christ.

You see, your only hope is that God, in His Love for you, sent someone to perfectly keep the Law. We sang of that together this morning. He was sent to keep the Law in your place, to do what you could never do, and then to die on the cross in shame, cursed of God. Isaiah 53 says, “the iniquity of us all fell on Him.” God treated Him as if He had lived our sinful lives so that He could forgive us. He became the ultimate fulfillment of all of those sacrifices so that God could forgive our sins if we would put our faith in Christ and in Him alone. That’s what you need to do this morning.

There’s a second application and it’s for those who claim to be Christians, but whose confidence is, in some measure, in the right or ritual of Christian baptism. I know there are people in our church who come out of backgrounds where baptismal regeneration was taught. That is, that in order to be saved, part of how you were saved was through your baptism. Listen, Paul is very clear here, any ritual, even a ritual God commands in the Scripture, circumcision or baptism, cannot save and if any of your confidence of heaven is in something you have done, including that ritual, then you have put your trust in the wrong place. You must abandon all hope in anything you have done and you must put your hope in the perfect life and the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ alone.

There’s a third application and it’s really for all of us, all of us who claim to be Christians. I would say, probably, I’m just guessing, 95 percent of us here this morning would say that we are Christians, we’re followers of Jesus Christ. Do you understand chapter 2 applies to us just as it

did to the Jews in the first century? The fact that you are basically moral doesn't mean that you belong to Jesus Christ. The fact that you know the Bible doesn't mean you're truly a Christian. The fact that you grew up behaving like a Christian is no indication of the reality of your faith and the fact that you claim to be a Christian, that you've been baptized, that you've performed other Christian activities, like attending church, etc., etc. Those don't insure your ultimate salvation. Here's the key question. Please listen to me. Here's the key question. Has the Spirit of God truly changed you at the core of your being? That's the question. Are you a different person than the person you used to be?

But let me get more specific. Let me give you a ten question checkup, very quickly, of the condition of your heart. You know, go to the doctor, you get the, sort of, quiz about the condition of your physical heart. Let me give you a little quiz about the condition of your heart spiritually. Can I plead with you? Please don't just listen to me read these questions. Please ask yourself, is this true of me? This is a test of your heart.

Number one, do you love God more than you love anything or anyone else, or is there something or someone more valuable to you than God?

Number two, do you truly worship God from the heart in the way He's prescribed? Did you this morning? Did you? Was your heart engaged as we sang and as we prayed and even as we study His Word? Are you expressing this as worship to God? Or are you merely going through the external motions without ever directing your heart to God your Creator?

Number three, do you truly respect and honor God and all of the things connected to God? His Word? His name? His church? Do you respect and honor Him and respect the things connected with Him or do you treat Him and those things connected with Him lightly, frivolously, perhaps even on occasion blasphemously?

Number four, do you delight in gathering with God's people to worship Him on the Lord's Day as He commanded? I'm not asking if you're here, that's obviously true. I'm asking you if it's your delight. Do you enjoy coming to be with God's people, to worship together with God's people, or frankly, honestly, would you rather just be somewhere else doing something else?

Number five, do you respect and honor those God has put over you in authority or in your pride do you see yourself as above them? Do you look down on them with contempt in your mind and sometimes express that contempt with your words and actions?

Number six, do you, as a habit, forgive those who have sinned against you or do you instead harbor anger and resentment and bitterness? Do you hold grudges against everybody who's ever sinned against you and that anger spills out in angry outbursts and in abusive speech and perhaps even in physical violence?

Number seven, do you cultivate a pure heart by fighting the temptation to sexual lust? This is a common temptation. The question is, what do you do with it? Do you cultivate a pure heart by fighting the temptation to sexual lust? Or instead, do you cherish your lust? Do you protect it? Do you guard it? Do you shield it so that you can have it as your little pet? Do you feed it gladly, give it whatever it wants?

Number eight, do you care for your belongings and the belongings of others as a stewardship from God, or are you careless with what God has given you, and do you look for every opportunity to take advantage of others to enrich yourself?

Number nine, do you consistently tell the truth or do you regularly choose to lie and deceive if it's to your advantage?

And number ten, do you have a grateful and content heart with what you have and with your circumstances in life, or do you find yourself constantly feeding an ungrateful discontent heart, essentially rebelling against God's providence in your life?

Now, as you probably figured out, that test comes from the Ten Commandments. But, as Jesus did, let's make it even simpler. Let's reduce it to just two questions. Do you love God and His Son more or yourself? Do you love others more or yourself? How is your heart?

If you failed the test it's likely you have merely external religion. You're wearing the label Christian but you've been mislabeled. It's not true. You need God to change your heart. You need the gospel.

Listen to 2 Corinthians 5:17, "if anyone is in Christ," if you're in Christ, if you're a Christian, "*he is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, new things have come." Is that true of you? Are you a new creation? Are you a different person than the person you used to be? Was there a time in your life when you came to understand the gospel of Christ, you repented and believed, and God changed you, and you don't love what you used to love, you hate it, and you don't hate what you used to hate, you love it now? How is your heart? That's the evidence of whether or not you truly belong to God's people. Let's pray together.

Father, thank You for this wonderful check up. Thank You for the reminder from the pen of the apostle about what matters to You, our hearts. Father, for those of us here this morning who, even as we go through that little test, were disappointed with certain areas in our lives, and we want to grow, we want to make change, and yet, Father, we rejoice because we see that by Your grace, by the work of Your Spirit, we're not the person we used to be. Father, encourage us in Christ. May we leave here praising You and praising Your Son for what You've done, praising the work of the Spirit.

Father, I pray for those here this morning who came in perhaps knowing they're not Christians, perhaps in a state of active rebellion against You, or perhaps simply not sure, maybe here, even today, seeking something that they feel is missing in their lives. Father, help them to see that the answer is not found in religion; it's found in falling down before You and crying out for You to do for them what only You can do, changing their hearts by Your Spirit. May this be the day when they cry out.

Father, there are others here who came in this morning thinking that they were Christians, professing Christ. Lord, I pray that You would use the truth of this passage if that's not true. If they're simply labeling themselves that, as the Jews labeled themselves that, Father, may this be the day when You remove the disguise and You help them to see themselves as You see them. And may they come to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, crying out for You to truly change the core of who they are. We pray it, O God, that Your name may be glorified, that Your Son may be exalted. Amen.