

Misplaced Trust & Overconfidence Crushed

Romans 2:17-29

And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart...that you may live

Introduction: There are certain jobs that take years of training to achieve, and we are glad to know that is the case. No one wants their lawyer to have learned only by watching *A Few Good Men* or *My Cousin Vinny* if he is representing you in court, or a doctor that got an online degree, or a pilot that learned only by playing video games or simulations. Charlatans make for good stories, but are terrible if you have to rely on them. This is why the story of **Frank Abagnale** is so intriguing. According to his autobiography in 1980 and the follow up movie in 2002 called *"Catch me if you can"*, Abagnale chronicles his supposed forays into being an *Assistant Attorney General* of Louisiana, a physician in Georgia, and a pilot for *Pan American World Airways*, where he racked up over 2 million flight miles as the "dead head" on flights. He also claimed to be a sociology professor for two semesters (although that's not that great of a feat!), and became a forger of documents and checks around the world. Whether or not these tales are true or not, or if they are *all* true, it is clear Frank Abagnale was a world class deceiver, charlatan, and fraud. He looked the part, was convincing, could fool others, but the only thing he was qualified in was actually knowing how to lie to others. It also confirms for me that the 70's were just weird, but that's another study for another time.

What makes a good deceiver? One has to have a level of capacity, calm, consistency, and confidence. You must have social and emotional intelligence to read people and prey on their insecurities. But one of the most important ways that one can be a world class deceiver is if *they actually begin to believe the lie themselves*, blurring the line of reality, truth, and what is fake.

We come back to Romans 2, where Paul has been building a case against all people for all time, regardless of geography, background, age, or status, that we ALL stand condemned in our sin before a righteous, impartial judge of the universe. He started with the **great exchange**, how we all are prone to the kind of rebellion that suppresses the truth of God for a lie and exchanges worship of God for the worship of creation. This exchange then leads to growing **immorality** gives birth to full blown **insanity**, inventing evil and giving approval to others who do the same thing. He also called out those who **thought** they were righteous themselves, easily judging others but were themselves doing the same things. He then moved to those who trusted their own morality without realizing that their morals fall far short of God's standard, leaving them too under judgement.

Now, let's pause just for a few moments before heading into the next logical and prepared argument. There are **two things**, really above all other things, that I hope EVERYONE in this room are hearing during the study of these sections, whether you have been here for decades, weeks, or this is your first Sunday. **1)** This is not a study for *someone else* (man, I hope _____ is hearing this!), but a call for each of us to consider where we stand with the Lord. We can all be a bit of Frank Abagnale, putting on a false front of confident morality compared to others, even though we are completely insecure before the Lord. This is a time for YOU and ME to evaluate honestly, openly, and thoroughly. It's far too easy to point out the sin of others and miss the sin in our own heart. I was talking with some friends in the last few days who are politically liberal (not typical of most of my friends), and was reminded that it's easy to demonize others and miss the sin right in front of our face.

2) The whole point of this study is to see the **power and greatness of the gospel of Jesus Christ!** If you feel bad at all or are convicted, I can only hope it is enough to confess your sin, turn from it, ask God to forgive you in Christ, and follow Him in order to know, love, worship, and obey Him. The gospel is the answer, it is the point, it is the pathway to joy in the midst of chaos and painful circumstances. A vibrant, new, reconciled relationship with God in Christ is the point of all of this, and I do not want anyone here to be unclear about that. You are not here by accident, and we know that if you believe in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, then your life will never be the same and we can truly move forward with purpose and joy together.

Now, back to the text of the morning. We will look now at a case brought against the **Jewish people of Paul's day**, and their overconfidence in the gift of the **Law** and the sign of **circumcision**, trusting in these good gifts but missing the greater point they represented. In stripping away these areas of false trust and deception, he could actually infuse what a true Jew, or a true follower of God, looks like. Though Paul specifically makes a case for the Jewish nation, there are obvious overlaps of realities that we struggle with today.

OVERCONFIDENCE IN THE GIFTS OF GOD

Romans 2:17-24 *"But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God 18 and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; 19 and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, 20 an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— 21 you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? 22 You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? 23 You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. 24 For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."*

If you like logic and rational arguments, you love Paul. In fact, Romans would be a great study for mock trial students to learn how to build a case that appeals to reason and walks people step by step to a conclusion. It is clear that Paul is addressing those who were **Jews** by heritage and birth, and thus those who had all the privileges of Judaism. A Jewish person can trace their origins back to Abraham who became the father of a great nation and from whom the whole world would be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3). Abram was promised to have descendants that numbered like the stars and sand (Gen. 15:5), and God made a covenant with Abram to give his people the land of Promise (Gen. 15:18-21). This same people were who God grew, who were enslaved in Egypt, who were given the promised land, who had kings and a kingdom, who sinfully rejected God, were sent in exile, returned to the land, and in the time of Paul, were still trying to preserve their national identity. The Jewish nation were God's chosen people (Deut. 7) through whom He was going to bless the rest of the world.

One of the greatest gifts that God gave to the world through the Jewish people was the **Law**, a list of commands that would help people know the nature of God and to thrive in this world. The **Law is good**, but it was NEVER intended to save. The Law in some ways was like "Family Rules", those things that are stated and understood in every family: be home by a certain time, clean your room, do not lie to us, do chores without complaint, only approved boys may ever be in your presence and even then we're not too happy about it...stuff like that. These rules are NOT for our families bad but their good. But following them does not make you part of the family, or make us love you more. However, IF you are part of our family you will keep these out of love.

The problem that Paul identifies with the Jews of his day was NOT the Law, but the overconfidence and reliance on the Law itself for their standing with God. It would be similar to a son or daughter who never talked to you, shunned you, talked back to you, but kept their room clean. That would NOT express keeping the Law. So he gives **5 areas of reliance** and **4 areas of surety** that were practiced but misplaced (2:17-20).

AREAS OF RELIANCE:

1. Relied on the Law
2. Boasted in God
3. Knew God's will
4. Approved (tested) what was excellent
5. Instructed in the law

AREAS OF SURETY:

1. Guide to the Blind
2. Light to those in Darkness
3. Instructor to the Foolish
4. Teacher of Children

So far, this is a good list and one of *privilege*. The Law was “the *embodiment of knowledge and truth*”. The Jewish nation was given this particularly so that from birth, they would know who God was, worship Him, and make Him known. Far from being a detriment, the Law was supposed to give purpose and clarity in a world of chaos and darkness. But privilege does NOT always equate to reality, and Paul indicts the nation as a whole, not just individual people, in his next salvo with the pivot phrase “**You then who teach others, do you not teach yourselves?**” (21) He then lays out **four areas** of overconfidence leading to egregious sin:

1. You call out stealing, but you actually steal
2. You say not adultery, but you actually commit adultery
3. You loath idolatry, but you rob temples
4. You boast in the Law, but dishonor God by breaking the Law

Now, Paul since Paul is not speaking about specific people or circumstances, it is unclear what is meant exactly by each of these. Scholars are not united in what is meant by **robbing temples**, but the point is clear. The Jewish nation at the time of Paul claimed to know the Law, God, His will, and thought of themselves as teachers of others, but they themselves, like Israel of the OT, “*blasphemed the name of the Lord among the Gentiles* (nations).” We do know that Jesus called out the Jewish leaders during His life for the same things:

Jesus called out the **stealing** of the Pharisees, that instead of honoring their father and mother, found a way to circumvent providing for their parents by giving a sum “to the Lord”, and thus did not have to help out their parents, violating the Law. Jesus called this out as rank thievery and dishonoring of God:

You **hypocrites!** Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:

⁸ “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me;

⁹ in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men

Not to be undone, Jesus also called out how they treated others. Instead of being a true light, they actually made it HARDER for people to follow God:

Matthew 23:14-15 *“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, **hypocrites**! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. 15 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, **hypocrites**! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you **make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.**”*

Paul called out the Jewish nation for an over-trusting and confidence in the Law, and instead of keeping it out of love for God, they became hypocrites and brought dishonor to God (just like Israel in Isaiah 52:5, where God says this was one of the reasons they were in exile). But before we move on, do not miss the point for us today. **What are ways we can rely and trust our privileges but miss the point?** We can say the Bible is important and vital, but we neglect it both in study and practice. We say loving and gathering with the church is commanded, but we make it merely a marginal part of life. We say God owns everything, but often steal from Him, spending it on ourselves and giving back a measly amount. We say morality is important, but complain just like everyone else, or lust with our eyes, or blow up in anger just like those without Christ.

OVERCONFIDENCE IN A GRACIOUS SIGN

*For **circumcision** indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. 26 So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? 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.*

God gave Abraham a **sign** of the covenant in Genesis 17:9-14 (although he might have preferred a ring or hat), which was the cutting away of the foreskin of every man and 8-day old male baby born into Israel from then on. This was a **symbol**, an external sign that identified a Jewish man and reminded him of God’s everlasting covenant to them. It symbolized the need of their hearts that needed to be cleansed from sins deadly disease. This meant that each Jewish person would need a spiritual surgery to cut away the fleshly things in order that they could truly worship God and obey Him. It is what Jeremiah 4:4 captures:

***Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; remove the foreskin of your hearts,**
O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire,
and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds.”*

But like so many good things, circumcision became a legalistic means rather than a sign. It became the means of identity rather than pointing to it. By the time of Paul, there were some good reasons for it.

*“From roughly 175-165 B.C, a violent Hellenistic ruler named Antiochus ruled Judea. He attempted to impose the Greek way of life on Israel and to eradicate expressions of conservative Judaism, especially temple sacrifices and circumcision. Both rituals became a flash point. Parents were willing to die to have their sons circumcised (1 Macc. 1:41-64), and from that time on, circumcision became **the sign of loyalty to God and covenant**. Eventually, Jewish rabbis said that **no circumcised man would go to hell (Gehenna)** and that circumcision would **save the nation.**”¹*

¹ Daniel Doriani, “Romans: Reformed Expository Commentary”, p. 80-81

We are all prone to allowing symbols and signs BECOME the means of righteousness instead of Christ. Paul's point was relatively simple. **Circumcision** is a good thing when it points to the greater work of God in the heart. But the physical act of circumcision means **nothing** if it is NOT the result of a greater work of God. So if God changes someone and they obey, worship, and love God, but are NOT circumcised, they are better off than someone who IS circumcised alone, without any real change.

This is eerily similar to the symbols we have today. We have **two main symbols** that point to greater realities of Christ that we practice regularly: *Communion and Baptism*. These are both gifts of grace that point to greater realities, identify the work of Christ, and remind us of what He has done. But sometimes people can point to their **baptism** as the reason they are saved, rather than seeing it as coming OUT OF their salvation. If you think you are saved because you have been baptized in the past and not because God has granted you the grace to believe and repent, you are on shaky ground at best. I grew up with many friends who were baptized as infants, were taught and catechized, and thought that growing up in the church was a means of salvation. They became disenchanted with the Bible, church, and Christ because it was merely outward actions without inward changes, like putting on a Pilot uniform or lab coat and thinking it makes you a pilot or doctor.

OVERCONFIDENCE GRACIOUSLY CRUSHED

Romans 2:28-29 *"For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. 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."*

THIS IS THE REALITY. If you have not paid attention til now, this is the time to tune in. Paul lays out the reality of salvation for a Jewish person, which is simply salvation for every person.

1. Salvation is from the INSIDE OUT
2. Salvation is a MATTER of the HEART produced by the Holy Spirit
3. Salvation seeks the praise of God, not man

This has ALWAYS been the case. Listen to how the OT lays this out:

Jeremiah 9:23-26 *"Thus says the LORD: 'Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, ²⁴ but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD."*

²⁵ *"Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh— ²⁶ Egypt, Judah, Edom, the sons of Ammon, Moab, and all who dwell in the desert who cut the corners of their hair, for all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in heart."*

Deuteronomy 30:6 *"And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live"*

Do you see this? God will circumcise our heart, but we also need to circumcise our own heart (Jer. 4:4) because what we really need is NOT EXTERNAL CONFORMITY but INWARD TRANSFORMATION. We have to recognize that our hearts are both deceitful and wicked. We put on external things to convince others and ourselves that we are in good standing, but if we do not actually **love God, delight in Him, and love His commands**, it reveals what is actually in our heart. **Faking this does no one any good.**

This is the essence of repenting of our sinfulness and sin and yielding ourselves to Christ, which allows the Holy Spirit to cleanse us from the inside out (2 Cor. 3:6). We ask God to cleanse our hearts, to give us new ones, so that we would actually DESIRE and DELIGHT in Him. When our inner man, our secret self, is cleansed, we can stop pretending, stop acting like a good, moral person, and recognize our deep depravity and welcome in a new heart that loves the Lord with all our heart and soul.

This last week I spent a few days with the Encompass board, which is one of the missions sending agencies we work with. One of the conversations we had was the fact that by year 5, almost half of missionaries return home, and by year 7 or 8, 75% leave the field. The problem is, all the stats point to year 8 as the primary time where real fruit in church planting begins. ***What kept missionaries on the field past 8 years?***²

- ***Cling fiercely to God***
- ***Robust Theology of suffering***
- ***Delight in the Word***
- ***Recalibrating Prayer***
- ***Humility***
- ***Understanding Grace***
- ***Holy Relationships***

What struck me about this list is the fact that it had nothing to do with gifting or call, but simply being a redeemed believer who longs to love God and make Him known. These are the marks of a circumcised heart, because the heat of life on the mission field is too hot to fake it.

Are you dressing up like a Christian? Are you merely playing a part? Are you relying on being around spiritual things but have not actually known or enjoyed them? Do you have an actual relationship with Christ and a delight for His Word, or does it feel like you are living someone else's experience? Today is a day this can change. Today is a day to believe, repent, and turn to Christ, asking God to give you a new heart so that you can love Him with all your heart and soul.

² Study done by *Pioneers* missions agency, which was a self-study of hundreds of deployed staff