

## THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES

Romans 2:28-29

Bob Bonner

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In 1837, Hans Christian Anderson wrote many of his world famous children's stories. One favorite is "The Emperor's New Clothes." It is about a certain ruler who was very fond of appearances and clothing. So when clever philosophers (actually con men) offered to weave him a rare and costly garment, one that would dazzle the eyes of others, the emperor was quite receptive. He especially liked their promise that this unique garment would be invisible to all but the wise and pure in heart. The delighted emperor commissioned his new clothing at great cost, and the con men sat before the empty looms and pretended to be weaving.

Soon, the emperor's curiosity became such that he sent his chief minister to see how things were going. Seeing no cloth on the busy looms, and not wanting to be thought unwise and impure in heart, the official returned with a report about the fabulous beauty of the cloth. After a time, the weavers asked for more money. Again the emperor became impatient, sending his second chief minister, who returned with an even more enthusiastic report. Next, the emperor himself went to check up on the project of his new outfit. Though he too saw nothing, he did not want to appear stupid, so he proclaimed the clothing excellent and beautiful. He even gave the weavers medals.

Finally, on the day set for the grand parade, the con men dressed the emperor in his nakedness and then promptly skipped town. As the emperor paraded before his people au naturel, the whole populace joined in praising his beautiful new clothing, lest they be thought of as fools, disloyal, and wicked. Thus, the absurd parade continued until, in a moment of quietness, a child was heard to say, "Mommy, the emperor isn't wearing any clothes!" At once everyone, including the emperor, knew the jig was up and the truth had been told.

One innocent but honest remark by a small child who did not know enough to keep his mouth shut stripped away the hypocritical pretense of the entire nation.

The truth of this story is profound. It reminds us that our nature as human beings is to remain quiet, even when we have known all along that a lie or a belief system is being promoted as true when it is not. Why do we remain silent about what we know deep down to be untrue? One reason is reflected in this story about the emperor. We value the opinion and acceptance of others so much, that even if we know the naked truth, we will deny it out of fear of rejection or loss of approval. [Hughes, *Romans*, p. 71-72]

This reminds me of one of my favorite Proverbs, because it is something I have had to deal with all my life. **Proverbs 29:25** teaches that, “**The fear of man** [that is, being so concerned about what others think of you or can do to you, like reject or mock you] **brings a snare.**” This fear is like a bear trap that, once you step in it, can crush your leg and maim you for life if you make through the ordeal. This fear, this snare, can so grab you that you won’t be free to live your life. “**But he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted.**” When we put our confidence in God and what He declares as true, we may not escape immediate rejection, ridicule, or worse; but in the end, God will raise us up, and He, the creator and eternal sovereign over all, will say, “**Well done, good and faithful servant.**” And what others may think about us or do to us will never matter.

But how quickly I can forget this and put greater value in what others think of me or can do to me than what God says is true of me.

Our passage for this morning in **Romans 2** begins with a truth for the religious devotee and, specifically, the Jew. This truth is that God does not value that which is taught and valued by the religious. We will learn this morning what God truly values in someone--what it is that will, in the end, lead that person to a complete acceptance by God.

I will never forget one afternoon in college when I was deep in thought reading this very section of scripture, and the truth of these two verses was driven home to my heart. It changed the way I viewed God and the life he had called me to live. In a nutshell, I learned for the first time that God did not so much want good deeds from me, but that He wanted my heart, the very core of who I am. He wanted all of me, my loyalty, and my adoration. For if He

had all of my heart, then eventually the deeds He desired would come. It was this passage that once and for all anchored my soul in the understanding that God loved me, and that all He hoped to receive back from me was my heart-devotion to Him. When I understood this, I immediately committed wholeheartedly to Him.

As we will see, these words of Paul, written with the religious Jew in mind, were a radically new concept to them, one they had difficulty accepting at first. But as Paul would continue to spell out the truth of these words through the end of **Romans 4**, the true Jew would not only understand the truth, but would rejoice in it, just as two of the greatest heroes of Judaism rejoiced, their father Abraham and King David.

What was this radical truth that Paul revealed? What lie or deception would this truth uncover? The truth that we are about to see would expose the lie that people had, out of fear, grasped on to, that was as great a deception as the emperor's new clothes.

Part of the lie or deception that the Apostle Paul thus far has exposed is the lie that at our core, the human race is basically good, not evil. This deception had led people to worship themselves as a glorious creature, one who does not need God nor even need to recognize the fact that God exists. This is part of Paul's point spelled out in **Romans 1:18-23**. From **verses 24-3:20**, Paul lays out God's case against the human race and our need to be forgiven and delivered from ourselves.

Last time, we began looking at that condemned group of the human race who fall under the category of the Religious devotee. Although this passage specifically speaks to the Jews, we noted last time that the three things that the Jew confidently holds to as evidence that they can and will be accepted by God are the same three things that other religious people confidently hold to as being the basis for their acceptance and approval by God, whether they be Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, Muslim, or of the Bahia Faith.

First, the religious devotee's assurance of being accepted by God is based upon their chosen name. In other words, people think, "Because I'm a Baptist, or Muslim or Jew, I'm in with God!" But Paul explains that your

spiritual heritage or religious affiliation which has a name is inconsequential as far as God and His acceptance of you is concerned.

Secondly, we saw that typically the religious devotee finds assurance of being accepted by God based upon their possession of some source of truth. For the Jew, it is the Law that God gave them. For the Muslim, it is the Koran. For the Mormon, it is the Book of Mormon. For the Christian, it is both the Old and New Testament. But God shows us that possessing a book that represents to you the source of truth not mean you are accepted by God.

Finally, the third reason for the religious devotee's assurance of being accepted by God is based upon a rite. It could be something as simple as circumcision, baptism, communion, or another unique spiritual rite of passage. In the end, however, those outward things are meaningless as it concerns God's acceptance of an individual.

But in **verses 28-29**, where we find ourselves this morning, Paul carries on his discussion of this religious rite of circumcision to relate what God says is necessary for a religious devotee to be approved by God.

As we read these two short but weighty verses, we will see Paul allude to Christians as he discusses what qualifies someone to be a true "**Jew**," and thus what is necessary to be saved. At the heart of these verses is Paul's denial that any outward rite such as circumcision can save. Furthermore, he will write two things that are absolutely shocking to the Jew: first that circumcision is no longer required to be saved/accepted by God, and second that the term "**Jew**" could be applied to those who ethnically were not Jews, but Gentiles.

There is one last point about these two significant verses. Here, Paul reaches ahead to his argument that he will unfold more fully, beginning with that exciting good news segment in **3:21-4:25**, in which is found the basics for salvation, for people's total forgiveness for their having rejected God. God has made it possible for someone to be fully accepted and embraced by God!

With that, follow along in your Bibles as I read **Romans 2:28-29**. The Apostle Paul writes:

**For he is not a Jew** [true Jew or saved person] **who is one outwardly;** [keeps laws, celebrates all of the mandatory Jewish feasts or follows religious rituals like circumcision] **neither is circumcision** [true circumcision] **that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew** [or a true Jew or a truly saved person] **who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter** [“letter” is one of Paul’s euphemisms for the Law]; **and his praise** [the true Jew or believer’s praise] **is not from men, but from God.**

Paul uses the rite of circumcision as a graphic illustration of what has to happen to the invisible part of a person, that inner being, or what Paul calls “**the heart**” for a person to be saved/accepted by God. His point is that if someone is going to be accepted by God, it all depends upon what happens to the “**heart.**” Paul uses this illustration of circumcision to tell us that something has to be removed or cut away or circumcised from our hearts, if we are ever going to enjoy a personal relationship with God.

This idea of the circumcision of the heart was nothing new to the Jews. Jeremiah wrote about it when he exhorted the Jewish people, in **verse 4:4a**, “**Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and remove the foreskins of your heart.**” God spoke to the Jews about this through Moses in **Deuteronomy 10:16**, where we God says to the Israelites, “**So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer.**”

But what does this mean, to have one’s heart, whether male or female, circumcised? It is a very important concept to grasp, because it cuts to the very core of the truth of the Gospel. Because this concept is so important for

us to understand if we want to experience the power and freedom that Jesus wants to give everyone who puts their trust in Him, we are going to go deep this morning to make sure that we get the basics. This truth will set the stage for you to better understand the importance of the Gospel for the Christian, and Paul will go on to explain it in the rest of his letter.

Allow me to introduce a model that I have used before in other Biblical teachings to help explain our humanness as God designed us. I will be using this model as we work through some difficult theology in the days ahead as we examine **Romans 8**. I hope that you, a Christian, find it helpful in understanding who you really are as God recreated you once you were saved. And for those of you who are not sure you are a Christian, this model will reveal why it is desperately important for you to put your trust in Christ.

The Bible teaches that humans are made up of three parts. Each person has a body, soul, and spirit. The body is obvious. It is that visible portion of your being.

What the soul and spirit are and how they function is not so obvious, because we cannot see them. They are both eternal, unlike the body. If you notice, the colors of the two circles for soul and spirit are different, in order to demonstrate that they are different from the body in that they are invisible, whereas the body is not.

In addition, the soul and the spirit share three attributes in common. Both the soul and spirit possess the same intellect, emotion, and will. I try to represent this by the dotted lines. These dotted lines indicate that the soul and spirit share certain things in common, but they are not the same.

The soul and spirit are different, although that is not always easy to discern as you read about them in Scripture. The reason for this we don't have time to look into this morning. But Scripture clearly shows that they are two different parts of a human being. We are told that they are different in **Hebrews 4:12**, where we read, "**For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and**

**intentions of the heart.”** The soul and spirit can be divided or separated into two parts. Hence, they are two separate entities.

The soul refers to that which makes up your personality. By personality, I mean those unique experiences, talents, likes, dislikes, giftedness, and leadership styles that make you you.

Your spirit, however, is that part of you that makes you uniquely different from any other part of God’s creation, specifically the animals. For instance, an animal has a body and a soul. If you have ever had a horse or cat or dog, you know that they each have their own personality and unique abilities and quirks. They even demonstrate that they have emotions. But according to **Genesis 1** and **2**, that which makes a human unique in comparison to the animal is that God breathed His breath of life or His Spirit into us to make us alive, both physically and spiritually. Our spirit is what enables us to be linked with and to commune with God, who is spirit. This unique ability to commune with God is not something the animals or plants possess, because God’s Spirit does not reside in them. Because you possess the Spirit of God, you, different than the rest of His creation, bear the very image of God.

In addition, your spirit is the control center of your being. It is the key to who you are. Depending upon what is going on in your spirit, your identity is either one of being a sinner or a saint. I’ll come back to this “sinner/saint” issue in a moment. If I were to correctly describe who I am, I would say that I am a spirit who has a soul that lives in a body. Once again, the key to who I am is my spirit.

Now, for the sake of terminology, let’s stop right there and clarify some terms. Whenever Paul refers in this book and in his other writings to these following terms, they are synonymous. They all refer to our spirits. These terms are old man, new man, inner man, spirit, and heart.

Let’s take this a step further. When Adam and Eve were first created, their spirits were spiritually alive, because they were linked with God’s spirit. While linked with God’s spirit, God enabled them to be and do all that God commanded. But when Adam and Eve sinned, God removed His spirit from theirs, and thus, their spirits died spiritually. They no longer had the same

intimate connection with God. This is why Paul, in **Ephesians 2:1-2**, writes about the Christian's life before he became a Christian, "**You were dead in your trespasses and sins.**" When sin entered the world, God's spirit was removed from the control center of our being, and as a result, our spirits died spiritually, but our spirits still existed. But without Jesus, our spirits are powerless, "dead" so to speak, to live as God has commanded us to live. We could know about Him, but we could no longer commune with Him. We were dead or cut off.

In the void of God's Spirit, something else took the Spirit's place and controlled not just our spirits, but became a part of our souls and body. This thing is what the Bible calls the "**flesh.**" I try to demonstrate this "**flesh**" entering our whole being with these lines that cross through all three circles.

To clarify, the term "**flesh**" is used in two different ways in the Bible. Sometimes it refers to the physical flesh, the skin and meat or muscle of your body. The second use of "**flesh**" is what we are dealing with here. If I were to say, "My flesh controlled me," or "I was acting out in the flesh," the term as used in that context refers to my human propensity or drivenness to attempt to function apart from God, or as if God does not exist. The Bible calls this acting out in the flesh sin. This understanding of the flesh will become very important if you are going to properly interpret and understand **Romans 6-8**.

When Adam and Eve sinned, their identity became one of being sinners. Apart from Jesus Christ, we are sinners. And as you can see, the flesh influences and ultimately takes over the control center of our being, that is our spirit. Because of sin, mankind apart from God is dead spiritually although alive physically.

For instance, in **Romans 7**, Paul writes about those times when we wish to do right and try very hard, but end up frustrated; because as hard as we try to do what is right, we can't. We fail, even as Christians. The reason for it is that apart from Christ, or before a person trusts Jesus as savior and Lord, we are sinners, controlled in our spirits by this thing called the flesh. Before we became Christians, our spirits were dead and helpless to defeat or overrule the flesh that drives us or the sin that controls our lives.

What we need to live a changed life is for the control center of our being to be changed. We need to have this flesh cut away from our hearts, so to speak, or circumcised, and our spirits made alive again, if we are ever going to be able to enjoy God and become the people we really want to be.

But how can we do that? Honestly, by ourselves, we are helpless to do that, which, in a veiled way, Paul points to in **verse 29** when He says, “**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.**” The Holy Spirit is the only one who can do the circumcision. Giving someone the Law or “**the letter**” or a list of rules to follow does not empower them with the ability to follow those rules. But if our heart is circumcised, and the flesh is removed from our spirit and replaced with the Spirit, the Holy Spirit of Christ, we now have the Holy Spirit’s power to do what we could not do before as sinners.

Hence, when a person invites Christ to be his savior, He comes into that person, His spirit joins his spirit, and he is now empowered to live as God has called us to live. He still has flesh tempting him in his physical body and soul, but now, as a believer with Christ in him, he can overcome the temptation of the flesh. As a result of this transformation, this regeneration, he has a new identity, from God’s perspective. He is no longer labeled by God as a sinner, but is called a “**saint.**” That word literally means that God sees him as a Holy One, set apart from those who are unholy. It is not because of anything he has done, but because of Christ coming into his life. With the flesh still in his soul and influencing his thoughts, he can still and will still sin. But he doesn’t have to, if he remembers and trusts in Jesus to enable him to live as who he is.

Now, let’s reread again those two verses, and see if they don’t make more sense to us. Paul writes:

**For he is not a Jew** [true Jew or saved person] **who is one outwardly;**

[keeps laws or follows religious rituals like circumcision] **neither is**

**circumcision** [true circumcision] **that which is outward in the flesh.**

**But he is a Jew** [or a true Jew or a truly saved person] **who is one**

**inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter** [“letter” is one of Paul’s euphemisms for the Law]; **and his praise is not from men, but from God.**

Paul doesn’t explain how a sinner can have his heart circumcised in **verse 29**, but he will explain this in the chapters to come. He is simply stating his case against the human race, that on our own, without a savior or some act of God, no human being is good enough to escape the wrath of God, due to sin.

However, I can tell you this much. If your desire is to have your spirit made alive so as to have a real and vital relationship with the living God, God says He will make it happen for you, if you will simply trust Jesus as your savior from sin (which is controlling our lives). And that is only the beginning. When you learn to allow Jesus to be the ruler of your heart, He will begin to transform your life. He will transform the way you think about life, which in turn will affect the choices you make and how you live your life. He will begin his transforming work in you. Now, maybe you can better understand the idea of being “**born again**” when you trust Christ. You are given new spiritual life, just like Adam and Eve had in the beginning, except for two things: presently you live in a fallen world, and originally they did not. But don’t worry, one day it will end and the new world to come will be better than Adam and Eve’s. Secondly, unlike Adam and Eve, once you are born again, because of the finished work of Christ on the cross, you can never be spiritually unborn. Jesus did it all!

