

THE GREATEST AWARD

Romans 2:17-27

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For just a moment, I want you to pretend that you are an employee of a major corporation, and you are working in one of its many divisions that are spread out around the world. At the moment, you are just one of the lower level employees in the corporate structure, but your dad is Chairman of the Board. The corporation has said that it wants to hand out the greatest employee award that it has ever made. It wants to send its most faithful employees on an all-expenses paid, two-week vacation anywhere they want to go in the world. From each division, one employee will be chosen who best fulfills the following four requirements.

The personnel manager comes before your division of six hundred employees to announce the four requirements. The first is that of perfect attendance at work for the previous year. After stating that, the manager posts one hundred names of the employees who failed to meet this requirement. You know your name is not one of them, because you haven't missed a day at work for several years. So you know you have already met the first hurdle.

Because this company prides itself on its public image, the second requirement for this bonus vacation is one of hygiene and dress. Likewise, you know that your name has not been put on report for sloppy or inappropriate dress or body odor. Furthermore, you take pride in being well-dressed and sprinkling just the right amount of cologne or perfume on every day. Hence, you were not surprised when two hundred others were knocked out of the running and that you were not among them. That leaves three hundred employees in the vying for this fabulous award.

How are you feeling? Pretty good!

Then the third requirement is given. For a few years, your company has been encouraging the employees to come up with innovative ideas for their product line. Those who have made suggestions in the past that were taken were rewarded immediately. But now the company wants to reward those, who although their ideas weren't used, were at least using their creative abilities and trying to come up with something useful. So, those who had presented the company with the most innovative ideas over three years were kept in the running for the award. And that knocked the numbers down from the original six hundred to twenty-five. You are among them!

You're feeling great, because you just know that the next requirement just has to be in some way related to production, and you don't believe that anybody can top yours. You have been pushing out the sales and making big transactions that have greatly benefitted the company. So if the fourth requirement is production, you know you are okay. You just have to be. As a result, you feel pretty cocky that you are going to be given this award. Even if there should be a tie, you have a chance of being given the award, because your dad is the head of the corporation. And being his child, those in charge of the award would probably make sure that if it was close, you would be given the benefit of the doubt.

And sure enough, the personnel manager cites the fourth requirement as being that of production. The announcement of the big winner is just about to be made. To say you have great anticipation is an understatement. You just know you have to have won this award. Or, have you? Are you the winner?

I imagine that is just how some of the religious Jews felt as they came to this point in Paul's letter to the **Romans, verse 2:17**. They had made the first three cuts of being approved of by God and escaping His wrath. First, they felt that they were not like the immoral godless hedonist that we looked at in **1:24-32**. They thought they have made the second cut, because, being religious Jews, they were not like the godless humanist, the self-righteous moralist whose understanding of God's righteous guidelines of judgment were faulty, in **2:1-11**. And finally, they knew they had made the third cut, because they were not like the enlightened pagan found in **2:12-16**, who knew nothing of the Old Testament Law. So far, these Jews were perhaps thinking that they were sitting pretty. Like religious devotees of other religions, they had three things that set them apart from all other people. And because of these things, they thought they would be rewarded with a heavenly, eternal, uninterrupted vacation with God.

But the Apostle Paul was about to burst their bubble. We must understand from the outset that the Jew's mindset in this matter could somewhat make sense to us, if we remember that, indeed, they were a unique people. They were the only people who could correctly claim that they possessed the status of being called God's people or the "Chosen Ones" of God, by virtue of God's covenant with them, founded upon the Law. But, without dismissing the Jew's claim, Paul insists that the privileges given to them by God did not exempt them from God's judgment, which was a surprise to them.

In **verses 17-27**, he exposed their unacceptability before God by revealing the weakness of the hopes they had placed in the three things they believed set them apart from all non-Jews.

Although Paul clearly addresses the religious Jew in this section, I have entitled this next

section of Paul's letter the religious devotee; because whether one is Muslim, Mormon, Protestant or Catholic, most religious people hold on to the same similar three religious stances as being the merit upon which they think they will win that eternal vacation. As Paul moves through the remainder of this chapter, he continues to set the foundation for his case that the only thing that will bring about God's justification, acceptance, approval, and forgiveness for all individuals who have suppressed the truth about God is putting complete and sole confidence in the finished work of Christ on their behalf.

You might have noticed that there are more verses directed at the religious devotee and why they won't make it on their own merit to earn God's approval than the previous three groups. The reason for this is that the religious man is customarily more blind to his need for a savior than the immoral hedonist, the self-righteous moralist, or enlightened pagan.

Let's begin by first reading **verses 17-27**, and then work our way through the passage. Paul declares:

**¹⁷But if you bear the name Jew and rely upon the Law and boast in God,
¹⁸and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being
instructed out of the Law, ¹⁹and are confident that you yourself are a
guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, ²⁰a corrector of
the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment
of knowledge and of the truth, ²¹you, therefore, who teach another, do
you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you
steal? ²²You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit
adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³You who boast in
the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? ²⁴For
“THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF
YOU,” just as it is written. ²⁵For indeed circumcision is of value if you**

practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. ²⁶So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? ²⁷And 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?

As I mentioned a moment ago, in this passage Paul points to three commonly held beliefs of religious devotees that they think will win them acceptance by God and an escape from the wrath of God. The first is found in **verse 17**. Paul writes, **“But if you bear the name Jew, and rely upon the Law, and boast in God.”**

So often, when you ask a religious person what is going to happen to them if they die, they respond, “I’ll go to heaven.” And when asked why, they cite the fact that they are Catholic, Baptist, Jew, Mormon, or Muslim, and because they carry that proud religious title, God just has to allow them into heaven. Their boast in God’s acceptance of them is based upon their chosen religious name.

In the case of a Jew, their title is oftentimes more invoked as a reason for being accepted by God than any other religious devotee. The name Jew came into existence after 586 BC when what was left of the nation of Israel was taken into captivity by the Babylonian empire. The remnant of the nation of Israel primarily came from one tribe, Judah, from which the name Jew was devised, and it later referred to the whole nation of Israel. The first time Jew is mentioned is in the book of **Esther**, which takes place just after the Babylonian Captivity.

Because this remnant of the nation of Israel escaped annihilation by the invading armies of Babylon, they considered themselves special. Even their name, which translated means, “His Praise,” carried with it a sense of privilege. God had chosen to spare them. So they took pride in their name. We as Christians also bear a name that carries with it a significance. It means, “Christ-bearer.” But even having a special name given to you by God doesn’t guarantee approval or acceptance by Him, as we will see.

The second common cause for the religious devotee’s boasting in God’s acceptance is also stated in **verse 17** and then further explained down through **verse 24**. In this case,

Paul is speaking to the Jews, but we can substitute just about any religion in here as well, even the religious folks who attend this church. In this case, the religious devotee is boasting in the fact that God must accept them, because they are the possessors of some sort of religious source of truth. For some, it may be the New Testament, the Koran, the Book of Mormon, or, for the Jew, the Old Testament, sometimes referred to as the Law.

Because of the Jew's possession of God's truth as it is found in the Law, the Jews, like other similar religious devotees, possessed a false sense security that they must be okay in God's sight. To further add to this false sense of security, the Jew believed they possessed three privileges that came with being the possessors of the Law. Paul writes about these three privileges in **verses 17-18**, **"But if you bear the name Jew, and rely upon the Law, and boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law."** Now let's stop right there, even though this is an incomplete thought, and examine each of these three privileges.

Paul tells us that their first privilege in possessing God's Law is that they can know his will. That made them special and unique. They believed that they alone could know what God wanted. They knew of His plans for this world. There are many today, even some who think they are Christians, who boast in their relationship with God because they think they understand God's Word and His future plan for this world and the world to come. Whether they do understand His will correctly or not is not a valid basis for being accepted by God.

Secondly, Paul says they **"approve the things that are essential."** This means they reject the common immoral attitudes toward life that those around them suggest are okay. And by rejecting the world's immorality and embracing Biblical morality, they make themselves out to be morally superior to others, because they agree with what God says. How often the religious folks take pride in not engaging in activities that their religion teaches is immoral. "We don't dance, drink alcohol or caffeinated drinks, smoke, chew, or go with girls that do." They take great pride in their moral practices.

Thirdly, they take pride in the fact that they are being **"instructed out of the Law."** They knew the Old Testament Law backwards and forwards. They could tell you how many books there were in the Old Testament and how many chapters in each book. They could tell you the author of every book. They could tell you what the middle letter of the very middle word in the very middle of the Old Testament was. They memorized great portions of scripture. Now, there is nothing wrong with scripture memorization or knowing your Bible. But to rely upon one's knowledge of God's Law for acceptance by God is false security. Even the demons can read the Bible!

Unfortunately, the delusion that being the possessors of the Law led to an assurance of

God's acceptance perfectly positioned them to see themselves as something special. This possessing of the truth led to prideful actions that they held sway over others in four ways.

This prideful behavior is revealed verses 19-20. **“¹⁹And [you] are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, ²⁰a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth.”**

Today we have people who are always ready to correct those around them based on their religious beliefs. They see themselves as a guide to the blind, whose job it is to impart truth to those unfortunate ones who have not learned anything yet.

Every now and then we run into prideful people who are quite ready to dazzle us with their knowledge of the Scriptures. They know all about the anti-Christ, they want to argue about spiritual gifts, and want to impress us with their knowledge of the decrees of God. They want to impress others with what they know about the kenosis theory of Christ, or the supralapsarian position of people before the Fall, and so on. They take great pride in these things. Hence, they see themselves as a light to those who are in darkness.

This same prideful attitude reveals itself when they become a corrector of the foolish, those who have never been educated about God's truth. It is not simply the action of instruction or correction, but in doing so they have a condemning attitude or a manner of speaking down to the uneducated, non-religious person about the things of God. “Don't you know it is wrong to have sex with multiple partners outside of marriage?” But when a child grows up with a parent who has multiple partners coming and going from the home, what else is the child supposed to think about sex? Do you really think they are going to conclude that sex was meant only to be participated in between a husband and wife?

Nothing turns a non-Christian away from Christ faster than when truth is thrown at them from the lips of an arrogant messenger. Nothing turns off the immoral person more than those who arrogantly think it is their job to be the moral police over all the ignorant. Yes, we are to give an answer for what we believe. I'm not saying that one should not speak the truth. But equally important is the manner in which you pass on the truth. I am not Jesus, and hence I can't say to the religious Pharisees, **“Your father is the devil!”** That's the very condemnation that Paul writes against. Jesus can make that condemning statement, because He is God.

The final prideful action of the religious devotee is that he/she sees themselves as the teacher of the immature. In the past, I have found young Christians who appear so excited about their faith that they want to teach others what they are learning. But in asking these young zealots a few questions about their faith, I haven't been convinced that they really get the gospel themselves. In addition, I have often found that the motivation for teaching is a prideful one, not one to selflessly help another. They want to teach others to gain personal self-worth. That is never a good reason for one to teach.

In **verses 21-24**, Paul illustrates the third common mistake of the religious devotee who thinks he possesses the truth, and that is that possessing the truth is not always revealed in his living it out. In these verses, Paul gives us four evidences from the lives of many Jews, that although they may possess the truth, you would not have known it by their actions.

We read in **verse 21**, **“You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one should not steal, do you steal?”** The religious Jew would never in the world think of blatantly stealing from God or others, but historically they have not been seen as people who came by their wealth fairly. They were viewed as thieves when they shrewdly took advantage of others. When it came to the letter of the Law, it was obeyed, but the spirit of the Law was not. By the way, I'm sad to say, this has been true of many Christians, Mormons, Muslims, and all religious devotees down through the years.

Paul continues to point to another area of wrong doing in their lives. He says, **“You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?”** Jews were slave traders. It is a well-known fact that they believed that if you were married and had a slave, because the slave was considered a personal possession and not so much a person, you could freely engage in adultery. Husbands often divorced their wives for frivolous reasons, just so that they could bed another woman. Jesus condemned this practice. The Law does not permit this form or any form of adultery. The Jews were often guilty of being adulterers.

In **verse 22**, Paul cites another failure on the religious Jews part to live up to the Law. He writes, **“You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?”** They robbed temples. Some believe that what Paul has in mind here is the scandalous incident that took place in AD 19, as recorded by Josephus. (*Antiquities*, XVIII. 81 FF.) Four Jews in the city of Rome persuaded a wealthy Roman proselyte, Fulvia, to convert to Judaism and to make a significant contribution to the temple treasury. Upon receiving the money, they never gave it to the temple, but used it for their own gain. When the emperor Tiberius Caesar heard about it, he expelled all resident Jews from Rome.

Acts of thievery, adultery, and sacrilege were the highest form of hypocrisy. We are not talking about a momentary mental lapse here. We are talking about a religious lifestyle that never allowed the truth of God's Word to get past the mind and into the heart. It was all knowledge. Because of this hypocrisy, Paul says, **"You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? For 'THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU,' just as it is written."** The font change in that verse tells us that this is a quotation from the Old Testament. This is a paraphrase of **Isaiah 52:5**, where God is speaking a word of condemnation against Israel because of their lifestyle, and because they caused God's name to be blasphemed.

To the Jew, blasphemy, or the putting down or causing of others to put down the name of God, was the worst of all sins. These words of Paul must have been hard for them to be reminded of. Like the Jews today, there are many Christians who keep a mental record of how many people they have led to Christ; yet they never keep any records on how many they have driven away due to having made a mockery of God's name by their lifestyles. Many religious devotees are just like this religious Jew.

So we have seen thus far that the religious devotee's assurance of being accepted by God is based upon their chosen name, **verse 17a**. Then we saw that the religious devotee's assurance of being accepted by God is based upon their possession of a religious source of truth, **verse 17-24**. Now Paul turns to a third boast upon which the religious devotee bases his acceptance and approval by God, and thus, mistakenly thinks he escapes God's wrath. It's found in **verses 25-27**.

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

Regardless of the religion, it seems that all religious devotees turn to some religious rite to base their worthiness to be accepted or approved of by God. Here Paul speaks to the supreme Jewish symbol or rite that separates the Jew from all other people, circumcision. Circumcision, like baptism, in itself is a ritual that possesses no saving property. It does nothing to earn God's approval. However, as a rite, it typically points to something

special.

But the Jews did not believe this. They believed that the very ritual was that which saved you. Rabbi Menachem, in his commentary on the *Books of Moses* says, “Our rabbis have said that no circumcised man will see hell.” Another Jewish theologian states, “Circumcision saves from hell.” And a third declares, “God swore to Abraham that no one who was circumcised should be sent to hell.” One final Jewish authority dogmatically states, “Abraham sits before the gate of hell and does not allow that any circumcised Israelite should enter there.” [Hodge, p.63] Each of these Jewish theologians clearly missed the meaning of circumcision. As we will see when we come to **Romans 4**, Paul, the Jew, will prove from the Old Testament that the rite of circumcision never saves.

A religious rite, whether you are talking about circumcision, baptism, or confirmation, has a purpose behind it. If the person who observes the religious rite misses its purpose, then the religious rite is worthless. That’s what Paul means when he says that the Jewish man’s circumcision becomes uncircumcision. Paul’s argument is devastating to the Jew. One of the greatest insults in Judaism was to call another Jew uncircumcised.

Paul goes on to add insult to injury. He says that if, and this is a big if, the non-religious person naturally, from the inner man, lives his life so that he fulfills the purpose behind the religious rite without having followed it, then the non-religious person will judge or condemn the religious person by his actions. That’s the point behind **verses 26-27**. I say that Paul’s if is a big if, because this condition is actually impossible. It would be like saying, “If the moon were made of green cheese, I’m so hungry, I would it!” Well, obviously, the moon isn’t made of green cheese, so no one could eat it as such. This is simply a literary device used to prove a point.

For example, Caiaphas was the high priest who was responsible for Jesus’ crucifixion. He was a circumcised Jew and prided himself in having fulfilled the whole law. Yet he ripped off the people in the temple with his bazaar booths and money changing stands, and he illegally put Christ to death for his own political purposes.

But in contrast to this Jew, in **Acts 10** we read about Cornelius, the Roman centurion, a godly gentile, an uncircumcised man, who sought after God from his heart. God sent an angel to Cornelius to tell him to see Peter to get the information on how to receive eternal life. Cornelius’ comparatively righteously lived life as an unsaved gentile seeking after God condemns one such Jew as Caiaphas. The religious rite, to mean anything, was something that had to originate in the heart, not the head.

By the way, let me make an application from Cornelius’ life that may be helpful to some

of you who wonder about those who have never heard of Christ nor had a Bible--could they ever be saved? Cornelius proved to be a man who desired to truly know God, and God, knowing that, sent an angelic messenger to get Cornelius the information he needed to put his trust in Christ. It has been demonstrated several times by missionaries who have gone into Stone Age cultures to share the Good News about Jesus, that they find that they had been given a basic saving knowledge of Jesus through a vision or dream that came to one of their tribal leader generations before. But, other than the basics of someone coming to die for their sins, they knew nothing more. Hence, they could not wait to learn more about Jesus when the missionaries showed up.

All of this is to say that if someone is being drawn to truly knowing God, no matter where they are, God will make sure that that individual will hear the Good News of Christ so as to properly respond.

On the other hand, keep in mind the many that have heard the Good News, the Gospel, have not responded.

Paul, throughout this letter to the **Romans**, explains the truth that salvation comes by faith, not works, nor religious rites nor heritage. There is probably no better passage in **Romans** than this one to summarize the correct teaching about salvation: **“If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.” Romans 10:9-10**

