

PRETENSE

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Unashamed - A Study of Romans / Romans 2:17–29

Romans 2 ends with a sobering reminder: it's possible to wear the appearance of faith while remaining untouched by the transformation faith was meant to produce. Ritual, knowledge, and religious identity cannot replace an obedient heart. What God has always desired is not outward performance, but inward renewal through the Spirit.

Introduction

- I want to start this morning with a list.
 - Most organizations have a list of qualifications.
 - Colleges have admission requirements.
 - The military has physical standards.
 - You want to join the bar association, there are qualifications.
 - You want to be a licensed contractor, there are qualifications.
 - Even Costco wants to see a membership card.
- So I've been thinking — what are the qualifications for joining a church?
 - Most of us have a working list. We just never say it out loud.
 - So let me say it out loud for us.
 - To be a proper church member, you should have been raised in church.
 - Bonus points if your parents were members here, and your grandparents before them.
 - Generational tenure carries weight.
 - You should own a Bible.
 - A real one. Not just the app.

- Something with a cover that shows a little wear — but not *too* much wear, because that might suggest you've had some hard years.
- You should know the books of the Bible in order.
 - Both Testaments.
 - If you can do it in under thirty seconds, you're deacon material.
- You should have your language cleaned up.
- Your temper mostly under control.
- Your marriage visibly stable.
- Your kids reasonably well-behaved — at least in the foyer.
- You should know when to stand and when to sit, when to say amen and when to stay quiet.
- You should know the difference between a offertory and a benediction.
- You should not have any obvious, embarrassing sins.
 - Private ones are negotiable.
 - But the visible ones need to be managed.
- And above all — you should have it mostly together.
 - You're a work in progress, sure. Everyone says that.
 - But the progress should be visible.
 - Measurable. Presentable.
- That's the list.
 - Nobody wrote it down.
 - Nobody voted on it.
 - But if you've been in church any length of time, you've felt it.

- I suspect, as I read this list, you might have felt a little cringe coming over your face.
 - “He actually said the quiet parts...OUT LOUD!”
 - And maybe as I read that list, you felt the need for a little bit of instinctual pearl-clutching.
- But here's the problem: that list has nothing to do with what actually gets you in.
 - R.C. Sproul, in his commentary on Romans, puts it this way: *"The church is filled with sinners, and being a sinner is the first qualification for joining a church. We have to be sinners to get in because it is not a place for perfect people."*
 - Being a sinner is the first qualification.
- So let's read the room...
 - There are some people who walked in this morning and you feel like your life is kind of a hot mess right now.
 - You might describe your life in a lot of ways, but “put together” isn't one of them.
 - If that's you, then I'd like to welcome you.
 - This is right where you belong.
 - You haven't found the perfect church and even if it was, I ruined that when I got here this morning.
 - And the reality is that you're more qualified to be here than you might think.
 - But then there are some people who walked in here this morning and you're convinced that YOU have it all together
 - I've got my baptism certificate, my AWANA awards, depending on the church you grew up in, you could even find a Sunday School pin or two.

- If you look at my passport - it's has been stamped in some off-the-grid location where I painted a church.
- You might even have an ordination certificate
- But here's the facts - Paul has something to say to you as well.
- That's what [Romans 2:17–29](#) is about.
 - Not the obvious sinner.
 - Not the person who never darkened the door of a church.
 - Paul is talking to the person who is *in* — who has every credential, every privilege, every marker of religious belonging — and who has mistaken all of that for righteousness.
- There is a word for that mistake: It's called PRETENSE.
- So let's turn our attention to the last section of chapter 2 as Paul turns his attention to the privileged halls of religion.

Scripture Reading

Romans 2:17–29 ESV

¹⁷ 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.”

²⁵ 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.

²⁸ 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.

- As we have worked through chapter 2, the Apostle Paul has been on a tear!
- He began by dismantling the moral critic.
 - The guy who evaluates his own heart by comparing it to everyone else.
 - He thinks that God must surely approve of his life because he’s not fallen under the judgment of God.
 - When in reality, God’s patience isn’t approval, it’s grace.
- Last week, Paul turned his attention to a different person entirely.
 - Not the obvious moral critic.
 - Not the man who grades everyone else on a curve.

- This time — the person who never had the law written down.
 - The Gentile. The outsider.
 - The one who never sat in a synagogue, never heard the Torah read, never had the advantage of God's revealed word.
- You might think that lets them off the hook.
 - Paul says it doesn't.
 - Because God didn't leave anyone without a witness.
 - He wrote his law on the human heart.
 - And the conscience — that inner voice that accuses and defends — testifies that every person alive knows more than they've lived up to.
- Nobody gets to stand before God and say they had no idea.
- The voice inside them said otherwise.
- But Paul isn't finished.
 - There's another group sitting quietly in this theological courtroom.
 - They've been listening to all of this — nodding along, maybe even relieved.
 - The moral critic got exposed. The outsider got addressed. Surely now Paul is done.
- He's not done.
 - He turns — and he looks directly at the most religious person in the room.
 - The one with the most knowledge. The most heritage. The most access to God's word.
 - The one who would have considered himself the most qualified.
 - And it turns out that Paul has a question for him.

- And suddenly it becomes very clear...

Your Credentials are not enough (vv. 17-20)

- The intended audience of this letter was the church in Rome.
 - And that congregation was made up of mostly former Jews who came to trust in Jesus as their LORD.
 - To be completely fair, that was often a difficult move to make.
 - It's one thing to go from Gentile to Jesus.
 - Most of your former life of paganism just needed to die.
 - There wasn't a lot that carried over.
 - But to go from Jew to Jesus meant having to navigate what to do with ones Jewishness.
 - You spend your whole life following the Law, and suddenly in Christ, you're learning that salvation isn't found in trying to keep the law.
 - But Christianity didn't throw out the Jewish Scriptures - what we call our Old Testaments.
 - So it is easy to understand why there were some unique struggles for the Jewish Christian.
 - In a lot of ways, it's the same for a lifelong Catholic who leaves the Catholic Church to be a Baptist or Presbyterian.
 - Their Catholic faith was similar - used a lot of the same language - but differed greatly in the day-to-day expression of faith.
- As Paul turns his attention to the religious person, the first part of his defense is to take a look at their credentials.
 - Understand that this passage is written with a bit of ironic edginess to it.
 - "But if you call yourself a Jew..."

- He didn't say, "You who are Jews," or "If you are a Jew."
- We are very familiar today when somebody introduces themselves with the phrase, "I identify as..." and then they fill in the blank with some identity that doesn't necessarily line up with reality.
- Yeah...that's the same sense from v. 17.
- Paul is basically saying, "I'm not going to call you a Jew, but if that's what you want to call yourself..."
- The greatest achievement for a good Jew would have been their commitment to the Law.
 - That was the leading indicator of how "good" they were.
 - And it was the easiest thing to put on display.
 - Paul talks about their boasting.
 - He's not talking about people who quietly go about trying to follow the law.
 - He's talking about people who make their pedigree known.
- One of my favorite comedians is Brian Regan.
 - In one of his older routines, he talks about the "Me Monster."
 - This is the person who somehow manages to turn every conversation back to himself.
 - You mention you ran a 5K. He ran a marathon.
 - You mention a sore shoulder. He's had four surgeries.
 - You visited Florida. He climbed Everest.
 - Before long, you're just looking for the check.
 - Nobody enjoys dinner with the Me Monster.
- And Paul says there is a religious version of that guy.
 - He is proud of his pedigree.

- Proud of his résumé.
- Proud of his knowledge.
- Proud of his position.
- He knows the answer to every question.
- He has a verse for every occasion.
- And somehow every conversation circles back to one subject:
 - Himself
- Brian Regan's bit is funny because we all know that guy.
 - He's just annoying at a dinner table.
 - But it's something else entirely in a courtroom.
 - Because that's where Paul is taking us.
 - This isn't a roast. It's not Paul making fun of an obnoxious personality type for comic effect.
 - He's building a legal case.
 - And the Me Monster's resume — the one he's been so eager to recite — is about to be cross-examined.
- This guy is somebody who knows their qualifications.
 - Paul uses genuinely poetic language...
 - a guide to the blind, a light to those in darkness.
 - an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children.
 - Paul is basically saying, “If you look up the law in the dictionary, your picture will be right there.”
 - You think you are qualified to tell the whole world about what you know.
- But the tone of the passage makes it very clear.

- Your credentials may be helpful, but they cannot save you.
- What a gift is the gift of knowledge until it becomes the very thing you're depending on to get you into heaven.
- And then that gift becomes a tremendous curse.
- Please don't misinterpret this.
 - Paul never says these things are bad.
 - In fact, these are good things.
 - Knowing the Scriptures is good.
 - Teaching others is good.
 - Loving truth is good.
 - Being able to help others see clearly is good.
- The problem isn't the gifts.
 - The problem is trusting the gifts instead of the Giver.
 - The problem is when the résumé becomes more precious than the Redeemer.
- And the reality is this - your pedigree doesn't hold up under questioning the way you think it does.
- And the law you've been quoting at everyone else is about to be turned around and pointed at you.

Your Life Contradicts Your Label (vv. 21-24)

- Paul doesn't open with accusations. He opens with questions.
 - And they aren't hard questions.
 - But they carry tremendous weight.
- "You then who teach others, do you not teach yourself?"
 - You can almost hear the room get quiet.

- Because the issue isn't information.
- They already have information.
- They know the right answers.
- The issue is application.
- And that's a danger every church person faces.
 - I once heard a football coach say that the most difficult distance on the field isn't the ten yards to get a first down, it's the six inches between a player's ears.
 - Knowing what to do and actually doing it are often two different things.
 - It is possible to become an expert in truths that never actually make the eighteen-inch journey from the head to the heart.
- Paul continues:
 - "While you preach against stealing, do you steal?"
 - "You who say one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?"
 - "You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?"
- And the point isn't that every Jew was guilty of all these things.
 - The point is much deeper.
 - The people most passionate about exposing sin in others often become strangely blind to sin in themselves.
 - I wonder if you've noticed how easy it is to preach sermons to other people.
- You hear a message and immediately think:
 - "*Boy, I wish my husband was here.*"
 - "*I hope my teenager is paying attention.*"

- *"I know somebody who really needs this."*
- It's amazing how spiritually gifted we are at applying Scripture to everyone else.
 - Paul says, "How about yourself?"
 - That's uncomfortable.
 - Because it's much easier to carry a Bible than to submit to it.
 - It's easier to teach truth than obey truth.
 - It's easier to condemn sin than kill sin.
 - It's easier to quote Scripture than surrender to Scripture.
 - And religious people become masters at confusing familiarity with obedience.
- Then Paul delivers the hammer blow in verse 23:
 - "You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law."
 - In other words: The very thing you boast about becomes the thing that exposes you.
 - The badge you wear becomes evidence against you.
- And verse 24 may be the most sobering statement in the whole section.
 - "For, as it is written, 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'"
 - Think about what Paul is saying.
 - The issue isn't simply that these people have disappointed God.
 - The issue isn't merely that they have failed to practice what they preach.
 - The issue is that the nations around them have drawn false conclusions about God because of the contradiction they see in God's people.

- Their life contradicts their label.
 - Their profession and their practice are moving in opposite directions.
 - And the result is that God's reputation suffers.
- Brothers and sisters, that is why hypocrisy is such a serious matter.
 - Nobody expects Christians to be perfect.
 - The world understands failure.
 - The world understands weakness.
 - The world understands struggle.
- But what the world struggles to understand is pretense.
 - The person who projects holiness while secretly cherishing sin.
 - The person who knows the vocabulary but has never submitted to the truth.
 - The person whose public identity and private life tell two different stories.
- Labels don't impress God.
 - And eventually labels can't conceal reality.
 - Because God isn't evaluating us by what we claim.
 - He's looking at what we actually are.
 - And if that's all Paul left us with, this would be a crushing word.
 - Because none of us hold up under that kind of inspection.
 - Not the boaster in verse 17.
 - Not you.
 - Not me.
 - But Paul isn't finished.
- Because the religious heart is incredibly resourceful.

- The moment one refuge collapses, it starts searching for another.
- "Maybe my life doesn't match my profession."
- "Maybe I've been inconsistent."
- "But surely all these outward signs still count for something."
 - I've got the ceremony.
 - I've got the ritual.
 - I've got the badge that identifies me as one of God's people.
- And for the Jew in Paul's day, that badge was circumcision.
 - Circumcision wasn't some minor issue.
 - It was the sign of the covenant.
 - It marked you as belonging to God's people.
 - It was a source of tremendous pride and confidence.
 - So perhaps some of Paul's readers are beginning to think,
 - "Surely that counts for something."
 - And Paul says,
 - "Yes, it does."
 - "But not in the way you think."
- Because ritual cannot replace renewal.

Ritual cannot replace Renewal (vv. 25-29)

- By this point, the religious person is searching for one last refuge.
 - *"Okay, Paul, maybe my life doesn't always measure up."*
 - *"Maybe I've been inconsistent."*
 - *"But surely my circumcision counts for something."*
 - And Paul answers with three surprising truths.

- *First, outward signs have value, but only when they point to inward realities.*
 - Paul doesn't dismiss circumcision.
 - In fact, verse 25 begins, "Circumcision indeed is of value..."
 - It was God's covenant sign.
 - It mattered.
 - But signs were never meant to replace the thing they signify.
 - A wedding ring is valuable.
 - But nobody mistakes the ring for the marriage.
 - The ring points to something deeper.
 - And if the relationship dies, the ring becomes a hollow symbol.
 - The sign without the substance is empty.
 - And Paul takes this even further than we might expect.
 - Look at verses 26 and 27.
 - He says if an uncircumcised man — someone with none of the religious credentials, none of the badge, none of the ceremony — actually keeps what the law requires, his lack of the sign will be counted as if he had it.
 - And that man, Paul says, will condemn the man who has the sign but breaks the law.
 - Let that land for a second.
 - The outsider who actually lives it will stand in judgment over the insider who only claims it.
 - That should terrify anyone who's coasting on the badge.
 - Because God was never impressed by the sign.
 - He was always looking past it.

- Let us not think that this is limited to the Jews. We have our own versions.
 - Baptism.
 - Church membership.
 - Mission trips.
 - Bible knowledge.
 - Years of attendance, and all of the reminders we collect over the years.
 - These are all wonderful gifts.
 - But terrible saviors.
- *Second, God has always been after more than external conformity.*
 - This is really shocking.
 - Paul says in verse 28: "For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly..."
 - Merely.
 - That's the word that stings.
 - Because it means you can possess the sign and miss the reality.
 - You can wear the uniform and not belong to the team.
 - You can know the language and not know the Lord.
 - You can fool everyone around you.
 - But you cannot fool God.
 - Because God has always been after something deeper than behavior management.
 - He's after the heart.
- *Third, real transformation is the work of the Spirit.*

- Verse 29 is one of the most beautiful verses in [Romans 2](#).
- "Circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter."
 - Paul isn't saying,
 - "Try harder."
 - He's not saying,
 - "Become more religious."
 - He's not saying,
 - "Get better at pretending."
 - He's saying something far more hopeful.
- The very thing God requires is the thing God Himself provides.
 - The Spirit does what rituals cannot.
 - The Spirit does what credentials cannot.
 - The Spirit does what self-effort cannot.
 - He changes hearts.

Invitation

- And maybe now we can understand why [Romans 2](#) has felt so uncomfortable.
 - Because after spending an entire chapter tearing down false confidence, Paul finally lets us see what God has wanted all along.
 - Not outward conformity.
 - Not religious performance.
 - Not praise from men.
 - Not impressive credentials.
 - Not carefully managed appearances.

- God has always been after the heart.
 - And He has always intended to accomplish that work by His Spirit.
- Which means that pretense is ultimately unnecessary.
 - Think about that.
 - If God only accepted people who had it all together, pretending might make some sense.
 - If God only welcomed the morally impressive, perhaps we would have reason to hide.
 - If God were interested in appearances, then maybe we would need to spend our lives polishing the mask.
- But that's not what He wants.
 - He wants the heart.
 - Which means we don't have to pretend.
- Remember where Paul began.
 - Credentials.
 - Then labels.
 - Then rituals.
 - One by one, he stripped away every place religious people like to hide.
 - And when all the masks are removed, all that's left is the heart.
 - Which sounds terrifying.
- Until you realize that God isn't asking you to pretend.
 - He's asking you to come.
 - Broken.
 - Honest.

- In need of grace.
- You know, a lighthouse is a beautiful thing.
 - It's tall.
 - It's impressive.
 - It stands against the storms.
 - It becomes a landmark.
 - People take pictures of it.
 - Children draw them.
 - They inspire songs and paintings.
- But at the end of the day, nobody needs a lighthouse because it's beautiful.
 - They need it because it gives light.
 - And a lighthouse with no light is worse than useless.
 - It creates the illusion of safety while ships drift toward destruction.
 - Church, that's what religious symbols are without spiritual reality.
 - A baptism certificate.
 - A church membership.
 - An ordination certificate.
 - An AWANA award.
 - A mission trip passport.
- Without a changed heart, they are lighthouses with no light.
 - They stand.
 - They impress.
 - But they cannot guide anyone home.

- But praise God, Jesus didn't come to polish lighthouses.
 - He came to turn the light back on.
 - And the only way He can do that is by doing what the prophet promised in [Ezekiel 36:26](#), “And I will give you a new heart.”
 - He came to do what rituals cannot do.
 - He came to give new hearts.
- Which means the answer to pretense isn't trying harder.
 - It's receiving what only God can give.
 - And that's why being a sinner is the first qualification for joining the church.
 - Because sinners are exactly the kind of people Jesus came to save.