

Ruining the Reputation of God

Got Religion? – Part III

Romans 2:23-24

Introduction

In Romans, chapter 2, beginning with verse 17, the apostle Paul has revealed six reasons why the faithful Jew felt eternally safe before God. He:

- had a special name,
- possessed a copy of the Law,
- was proud of his monotheism,
- had special insight into the will of God,
- had the ability to discern between good and evil, and
- had received a biblical education in Old Testament Law.

But all of that did not constitute true safety. I could not help but wonder how many people today, feel they also are eternally safe because they claim the special name, Christian; they possess a copy of the Bible; they are proud to claim Elohim instead of Allah or Krishna as their God; they have an ability to discern moral evil; and they have received a Sunday school education not only in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament. Yet they, like the faithful Jew, will one day discover it was not good enough to enter eternal paradise.

The apostle Paul then, beginning in verse 19, gave four reasons why the faithful Jew felt entirely superior before men. They:

- considered themselves to be the spiritual supervisor of mankind; that is, they were guides to the blind; they were the ones who could see. In Matthew, chapter 15, verse 14, Jesus said of the religious leaders, "... they

are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit."

- considered themselves to be enlightened,
- felt superior because they considered themselves the standard of morality, and
- considered themselves to be the spring of wisdom.

The Jew believed that if the Gentile would only convert to Judaism, they would be rescued from hell.

How shocking and devastating it must have been, when Jesus Christ said to them, in Matthew, chapter 23, verse 15,

Woe to you scribes and Pharisees . . . you travel about on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

How many people today, consider themselves to be superior to the rest of the world because they know the truth about the Bible, are concerned over the waywardness of the world, know the standards of morality, and encourage people to join their church and learn from them? But in reality, their converts become only more confirmed in pride and hypocrisy and more entrenched on the path that leads to hell.

They have become religious, but they are still unredeemed. Religion has become, for them, as well as for millions of others, the road that leads to hell.

You might ask, "How do I know if I've been deceived? How can I examine my faith to see if I am truly redeemed?"

Paul's Probing Questions and Observations

In the next few verses of Romans, chapter 2, the apostle Paul began asking five questions that ultimately, revealed the reality of good soil and good seed that bears good fruit for God's glory. In our last discussion of Romans, we looked at the first four questions.

The religious man communicates truth, without personal application

The first question, in verse 21a, asked,

you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? . . .

1. What this question revealed about the religious hypocrite; the person who is self-deceived into thinking that they are safe, while they are, in fact, under judgment and in danger of eternal punishment, is this – the religious man communicates the truth, without genuine personal application.

In other words, the faithful Jew knew the truth and taught the truth of the Law, but had not applied the truth to his own life. Their religious creed did not produce righteous conduct. What they said to others about what they believed never affected how they behaved.

Now, the reaction of Paul's Jewish audience was anticipated. Paul expected the Jew to recoil with astonishment and say, "What do you mean we haven't applied the truth of the Law to our own lives? We keep the Law diligently; we pray and fast and tithe, and look at all the things we don't do, in our efforts to live righteous lives. We don't break the commandments of God – we keep them all and we are teachers of God's commandments."

The rich young ruler could not conceive of being a Law breaker and so, in Matthew, chapter 19, verse 20, he said to Christ, "All these [commandments] I have kept . . .".

This is like people today, who say to you and to me, "Why do I need to be saved? I'm not that bad – I haven't broken the big ones – I'm a pretty good person!"

It depends on who you are comparing yourself to in the world.

Isaiah was a teacher to Israel and, in chapter 5 of his book, he preached judgment to the nation.

In verse 8a,

Woe to those who add house to house . . .

In verse 11a,

Woe to those who rise early in the morning that they may pursue strong drink . . .

In verse 20a,

Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil . . .

In verse 21a,

Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes . . .

Six times Isaiah delivered the verdict, but, in chapter 6 of Isaiah, God pulled back the blinders from his earth restricted eyes. He saw the throne of God and the angels surrounding God in His glorious light and then, as recorded in verse 3a, heard the angelic hosts singing,

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts . . .

And Isaiah said, in verse 5a,

Woe is ME . . .

He is no longer saying, "Woe to those . . .", but now has changed it to, "Woe is me . . .".

If you look around long enough, you will find someone that you are better than. If you look at God, however, you are in deep trouble – for, as Isaiah tells us, in chapter 64, verse 6, even your righteous deeds are like filthy rags, when compared to His holiness.

Now Paul moves to specific things that the Jews never thought of, as they considered the depths of their hypocrisy before God. Look at verse 21b.

. . . You who preach that one should not steal, do you steal?

Now notice, Paul is not saying outright, "You're a thief," but instead, is asking rhetorical questions, expecting them to have their consciences provoked.

Do you steal?! Someone hearing this is stealing:

- the affections of someone's heart that does not belong to you,
- credit and praise for doing something that someone else did,
- from God, by keeping your money and your possessions mostly to yourself,
- their children from God, by not encouraging them or perhaps, not even allowing them to serve Christ and His church, and

- from their spouse the fidelity and devotion that belongs only to them.

Are you a thief?

The Pharisees, of Christ's day, had developed a clever scheme to keep from having to provide money and resources to their aging, dependant parents. They took their discretionary money and declared it "corban," which simply meant, "devoted to God". Then, they said to their parents, "Listen, we'd love to help you and we know you need financial help, but all the leftover money we have is dedicated to God. We just felt that we ought to commit it to God and so, we can't give it to you. Surely you wouldn't want it, since it belongs to God."

Jesus' response to them, as He dealt with this issue of "corban," in Mark, chapter 7, was the verdict, in verse 6b,

... This people honors [God] with their lips, but their heart is far away from [Him].

That is another way of saying, "You sound holy, but, in reality, you're a hypocrite. You can talk it, but you don't walk it."

So, the religious man communicates truth, without personal application.

The religious man talks about integrity, but does not live honestly

2. Secondly, the religious man talks about integrity, but does not live honestly.

The religious man denigrates immorality, without ever purifying his own heart

3. Thirdly, the religious man denigrates immorality, without ever purifying his own heart.

Paul goes on, in verse 22a, to ask,

You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? ...

In other words, the merely religious man will talk about how sexual sin is wrong, but he will not have purified his own heart.

Remember, adultery is as much a matter of the heart as it is the flesh. The Lord said, in Matthew, chapter 5, verse 28b,

... everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.

Someone committed adultery, this past week, by what they viewed on the Internet. Someone committed adultery by what they thought of someone they worked with. Someone committed adultery, this week, by what they wished in their heart about someone else.

The one who is a believer would hear that challenge and, knowing they have, would respond by saying, "That's me, oh Lord, forgive me. How sinful I am and how dependant I am on Your forgiveness and grace. Thank you, Lord, for the blood of the Lamb!"

The religious unbeliever would say, "That's not me. Yea, I might have looked at some things this week, but what's so bad about it? Yea, I might have looked at someone or thought about someone, but that's the way God made us."

My friend, you are deceived by the enemy of your soul and your own flesh. You are religious, but not redeemed.

One of the greatest evidences of true conversion is a passion for purity of the heart and life. One of the greatest evidences of true conversion is repentance and confession and sorrow over sinfulness. Like Paul himself, who said, in Romans, chapter 7, verse 24,

Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?

Like Isaiah, who said, in chapter 6, verse 5a,

... Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips ...

The religious man talks about character, but chooses commerce

4. The fourth question Paul asked struck at the issue of money. His timeless principle, from that first century practice of marketing stolen idols of gold and silver, is this – the religious man talks about character, but chooses commerce.

Whenever the choice between God and mammon comes around, God always loses.

One of the marks of the unbeliever is that whenever the choice has to be made – money or God; business or faith; career or character – money, business, and career will always win the contest. Commerce over character and greed over godliness are the marks of an unbeliever's unconverted, self-centered heart.

These are the first four questions. How would you answer them? Nobody knows your answers except you and God and perhaps, those who live under the same roof and see you for who you really are.

The apostle Paul said, in II Corinthians, chapter 13, verse 5a,

Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith, examine yourselves! . . .

And, that is exactly what he is doing in Romans, chapter 2, to the religious world of his day. He is challenging them to answer the most important question they will ever be asked.

The year before I gave my life to Christ, as a senior in high school, was a tumultuous year. The hymn, "I Surrender All," was sung at least once a month in the church my family attended. I can remember wishing the invitation would end quickly. I was also terrified of the rapture and of being left behind. I had prayed a thousand times to be saved – but God knew my heart, and I only wanted fire insurance. I had no desire for forgiveness and fellowship with God.

I can remember, as an eleventh grader, sweeping the gym floor one afternoon. I worked a few hours a week at school, on a work scholarship program, to help my parents pay that Christian school bill.

Mr. Garrick was the school superintendent. We did not see him often, as we usually interacted with the principal. Mr. Garrick was also the associate pastor of the nearby church that ran the school. It was a non-denominational church with a rather austere, formal feel to it. It was in that church that I learned to sing, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," O Worship the King," "The Church's One Foundation," and "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah". Mr. Garrick looked the part. He was a big man, with large hands and thick white hair, and he always wore a serious look on his face, or so it seemed to me. I never saw him laugh.

I was sweeping the gym floor one afternoon, with one of those long dust brooms, and no one else was in there but me. I was right at the half court circle, when the door opened and Mr. Garrick walked out on the gym floor towards me. I stood frozen with my arms resting on the broom handle. He came over to me, looked down at me, and said, "You may have others fooled, but I know you are not genuine. You've put on a good front, but I know you are living a lie."

My heart was racing, and so was my mind. I had not done anything they could punish or suspend me for. I was a missionary kid who never missed church – all my sins were legal! But that was not his point, he was talking about something far more serious than that. He was discerning and had somehow seen into my heart; he had found me out.

As abruptly as he had appeared, he turned and walked back across the gym floor and out the door. I can still remember his blue gray suit and his black wing tip shoes clicking along on that maple floor as he walked away. He had not offered counsel or conversation, because he had not expected a reply. He had simply delivered a message from God.

It is the same question Paul posed to the religious people of his day. No, they were not going to be suspended from the synagogue – they never missed a service. They were not in trouble with the law – oh no, all their sins were legal too. But, Paul was talking about something much deeper than that. By God's Spirit, he had seen their heart – and he was exposing it for what it truly was.

My friend, though I may not even know your name, I must ask you, "Are you living a lie, or are you truly alive? Are you merely religious, or are you truly redeemed?"

Paul's Powerful Verdict and Pronouncement

With that exposure now completed, Paul moves on in Romans, chapter 2.

The ruin of the Jew's reputation in the world

Paul gives the verdict, found in verse 23.

You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God?

In other words, the Jewish people had the Law of God and yet, they broke the Law. They were keeping Roman law, but breaking heaven's Law. In two ways, they disobeyed God's Law – in their:

- ungodly attitudes, and
- ungodly actions.

You need to understand that, by the time of Christ, the rabbis had begun teaching that since it was impossible to keep the Law, simply learning the facts about the Torah was good enough to please God. Some even taught that Jews were safe from God's judgment by simply possessing a copy of the Torah – the first five Books of the Old Testament.ⁱ

You do not have to obey it – just keep a copy with the other books in the house and God will be satisfied.

How many today, say the same thing the Jews said, “You don’t have to read it; you don’t have to live it or obey it; you don’t have to take it seriously; you don’t have to apply it; you don’t have to let it direct you and guide you and determine, through its objective revelation, what is right and what is wrong – you just have to own a copy and keep it somewhere in the house or under the car seat or on the coffee table, and God will be satisfied!

I remember one family being told by someone that the reason they did not come to our church was because we took the Bible way too seriously. It is just a nice collection of moral tales and Jewish tradition. You can believe that, but you had better pray you are not wrong!

Recently, my wife and I had dinner with a dear couple, who have since moved out of town. This was a farewell time for us and our children. Both of them are medical doctors and had come to the point in their lives where they knew they were missing something.

She was telling us about her first visit to our church. I had actually never heard how it happened. They were both raised in semi-religious families – one was Catholic and the other Protestant. Neither of them had really attended any church since marrying. When they moved to Cary, they decided, for their children’s sake, to find a church near their home, so their kids could attend Sunday school.

So, he stayed home with the kids and she came to the closest church to their home – our church. She slipped in the back and sat through her first evangelical service. At the time, we were studying the book of Esther. She told us that she sat there dumbfounded, as she realized that everything she had heard as a child – that the Bible was just a collection of stories – was not true. Instead, the Bible was alive and real and had meaning for life here and now. She went home afterward, walked into the house, and said, “Honey, we’ve been wrong – the Bible is for today.”

They came the next Sunday and the next. Then, they called the office and asked for me to come to their home and I did. They both accepted Christ and I discipled the husband for nearly a year. Her words are haunting to me. She said, “We had gone to church and been taught a lie about the Bible. It is for us to follow today – we were wrong.”

If you ask the average religious person about the Bible, they will say it is a good Book to own; it is a nice thing to quote at weddings, funerals and family reunions, but it is a collection of stories, at best, and not to be taken too seriously. And why should the world not feel that way, when the supposed believer does not seem all that obligated or interested in the Bible themselves.

Paul’s point to the religious Jew, in verse 23, remains the verdict of our day.

You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God?

Ladies and gentlemen, if you do not take your Bible seriously, the world will not take your God seriously.

The ruin of the Lord’s reputation in the world

The real problem, however, is not the failing credibility of the believer, but the credibility of God Himself. Paul continues on and says, in verse 24,

For “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,” just as it is written.

In other words, not only is your reputation a mess, you are also ruining the reputation of God.

The Greek word, “blasphemeo,” is transliterated, “blaspheme”. The word means, “to be evil spoken of; to speak lightly, profanely or impiously of God”.

Paul quotes from Isaiah, chapter 52, verse 5, when God is speaking to the nation,

“Now therefore, what do I have here,” declares the Lord, . . . “My name is continually blasphemed all day long.”

God speaks to Ezekiel, in chapter 36, verse 20, . . . ***they profaned my holy name; because it was said of them, “These are the people of the Lord . . .”***

The Jews were living such sinful lives among the Gentiles that the Gentiles, in effect, were saying, “If this is the people of Jehovah, what kind of God must Jehovah be?”ⁱⁱ

The same indictment came to David after sinning with Bathsheba and causing her husband to die on the battlefield. Nathan said to him, in II Samuel, chapter 12, verse 7, “. . . You are the man! . . .”.

We all know about that verse, but the verse we are not as familiar with is verse 14, where Nathan

says, “. . . by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme . . .”.

The believer has two ways of affecting the reputation of God:

- Jesus Christ said, in Matthew, chapter 5, verse 16b, to live in such a way that men “. . . may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” God’s name can be glorified and honored by the way you live.
- We are told, in Romans, chapter 2, verse 24, that living hypocritical lives causes God’s name to be blasphemed. God’s name then, can also be dishonored by the way you live.

In other words, the reputation of God depends on the way you live?! Has it ever occurred to you, in the daily actions, attitudes, responses, and decisions of your lifestyle, that God’s reputation is at stake?

May I ask you a question? What is the reputation of God in your world?

Doug Sherman and William Hendricks co-wrote a book on ethics for believers. They surveyed thousands of people and came to the conclusion that the ethical conduct of Christians varied only slightly from non-Christians. Sadly, they concluded that Christians act in nearly the same manner as unbelievers. They are likely to:

- falsify their income tax returns,
- commit plagiarism,
- bribe to obtain a building permit,
- ignore construction specs,
- illegally copy a computer program,
- steal time,
- commit phone theft, and
- exaggerate a product.

Does Christianity make a difference? In the life of a true believer – yes! Many of the “so called” Christians mentioned, by Sherman and Hendricks, are self-deceived hypocrites, who claim the name of Christian, but have nothing of the life of Christ.

What difference does Christianity make?

I love this advertisement that appeared in the *East African Standard* newspaper in Nairobi,

I, Allan Harangui, have dedicated services to the Lord Jesus Christ. I must put right all my wrongs. If I owe you any debt or damage, personally or through my businesses of Water Pumps Electrical and General Sales and

Services; please contact me at P. O. Box 73137, Nairobi, for a settlement. No amount will be disputed. God and His Son Jesus Christ be glorified.ⁱⁱⁱ

Something happened to that man – and he had to let his world know he was a different man. What an incredibly effective testimony!

Principles To Apply Today

Let me give you three statements that are true in every generation – in Rome, in this city, and in any location.

The greatest attraction to Christianity is holy living

1. The greatest attraction to Christianity is holy living. The greatest attracting force to Christ is a man or woman who lives like Christ.

The reputation of God is at stake!

The greatest obstacle to Christianity is hypocritical Christians

2. The greatest obstacle to Christianity is hypocritical Christians. The world laughs and mocks our Lord, when they see us living in sin.

You can talk all you want about what you believe, but the world is watching how you behave – and the way you behave will be so loud, people will not be able to hear what you are saying.

John Walvoord, chancellor of Dallas Theological Seminary, once said at a graduation ceremony, “I am afraid for this class – I am afraid that we are turning out too many graduates who have a great number of beliefs, but not enough conviction.”^{iv}

The Messiah is measured by the messenger

3. And, finally, in this summary statement, the Messiah is measured by the messenger.

I could teach mathematics, while living an immoral life, and no student of mine would say that I am not qualified to teach the principles of math. But to teach the things of Christ and to say, “Thus saith the Lord . . .,” or “I belong to God . . .,” or “Jesus is the Redeemer,” and then, to live an ungodly life, will stop their ears and mock your God.

If there was ever a time for the Christian to be different, distinctive, holy, passionate for purity,

ethical, honest, self-controlled, hard working, and gracious – it is now.

Ted Engstrom put it this way,

*The world needs [Christians]:
who cannot be bought;
whose word is their bond;
who put character above wealth;
who possess opinions and a will;
who are larger than their vocations;
who will not lose their [distinctiveness] in
a crowd;
who will be as honest in small things as in
great things;
who will make no compromise with [sin];*

*whose ambitions are not confined to their
own selfish desires;*

*who will not say they do it “because
everybody else does it”;*

*who are true to their friends through good
report and evil report;*

in adversity as well as in prosperity;

*who do not believe that shrewdness,
cunning and hardheadedness are the best
qualities for winning success;*

*who are not ashamed or afraid to stand
for the truth when it is unpopular;*

*who say “no” with emphasis, although
the rest of the world says “yes.”^v*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/4/2001 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ John MacArthur, quoted by David Jeremiah in Living by Faith, vol. 1, p. 78.

ⁱⁱ Alva J. McClain, Romans: The Gospel of God’s Grace (Winona Lake, Indiana, BMH Books, 1973), p. 84.

ⁱⁱⁱ R. Kent Hughes, The Disciplines of a Godly Man (Wheaton, Illinois, Crossway Books, 1991), p. 126.

^{iv} Charles R. Swindoll, Tale of the Tardy Oxcart (Word Publishers), p. 421.

^v Ibid., p. 421.