Good News for the Relativist and the Moralist
Romans 2:12-29

We're looking at Paul's letter to the Romans - a letter to a church in a city that Paul has never visited, but he wants to. Now, if that was you, and you get your chance to go to Rome for the first time, what would you do to prepare? In the past, you'd probably have read a guidebook or two, wouldn't you.

Well, Paul writes one. But not about the city, about the gospel. Because Paul doesn't want to go to Rome to see the sights, he wants to go there to teach the gospel. And to prepare, he writes this letter, and it's his most in-depth guide to that gospel, the good news of Christ.

Except, good news is only good news if there's also bad news, isn't it? You've got the all clear from the doctor! Good news, but why did you go in the first place? The bank has written off your debt! Wonderful news… why? Because you were in debt.

And in chapters 1 and 2, Paul is setting out that bad news. Like chapter 2:9: '*There will be tribulation and distress for every human being* who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek.'

In other words, it doesn't matter what your ethnicity is, or what your knowledge of the Bible is; it doesn't matter if you worship one God or multiple gods; it doesn't matter if you are deeply religious or think all morality is socially constructed, chapter 2:9, 'God shows no partiality'… we're all in trouble. We all stand under the condemnation of God.

Why? Why that bad news? Well, that's what we're going to look at this morning. Firstly at why moral relativism lands you in trouble; secondly, why religious moralism is no help to you in that trouble, and thirdly why Christ is the only way out of trouble.

Why moral relativism, like 'You be you' and 'don't be judgy', lands you in trouble
Look at v12, 'for all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.'

Think first about the second group he's talking about there: those 'under the law' - Jewish people. And God's law to Israel, in the Old Testament, is the standard God will use to judge them. Because just *having* the law isn't enough, the question is, have you lived up to it? Verse 13: 'For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.'

'Great', someone might say - maybe you if you're not yet a Christian - 'But I don't believe the Bible, I don't even own a Bible. So don't talk to me about me being judged by the Bible.'

To which Paul would say, 'I'm not. Because you won't be. Because the Bible's the standard for those who do accept it.' Because did you notice the first group? Those 'without the law,' who aren't going to be judged by the law. So what standard are they going to be judged by? Well, everyone's going to be judged by the standard of right and wrong they know to be true - by *their own* standard.

Because we all have a standard, don't we? Verse 14, 'For when gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, *they are a law to themselves*, even though they do not have the law.' In other words, you may reject the idea of moral absolutes, and with it the Bible, and say, 'what's true for you isn't necessarily true for me', but deep down you still have a law, Paul says. You still have a set of rights and wrongs that you want others to abide by.

Like, ‘don’t be judgy’ - which means you think being judgmental is wrong. Or, ‘everyone should just be more tolerant’ which means you think *in*tolerance is wrong. Or, if you’re playing or watching some sport, and you get hot under the collar about someone cheating, why does it bother you? Because cheating’s wrong. And hurting people? That’s never ok.

So, as CS Lewis points out in his book, *Mere Christianity*, the moment you say something like ‘how would you like it if someone did that to you?’ you’re saying, there is a law, which all should keep.

It’s why Paul says that people with absolutely no knowledge, or acceptance, of the Bible v14, ‘by nature do what the law requires.’ And they’re faithful to their spouses, and are great work colleagues, and they keep their word, and they’re compassionate to others. And they instinctively do the right thing *because they know it’s the right thing*.

Because they have a law. Verse 15, ‘They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.’

I mean, have you ever found yourself having to defend yourself to yourself? You do something, and this voice inside you starts saying ‘you should not have said that.’ To which another voice says, ‘yeh but she said it first.’ And that first voice is your conscience, Paul says. Helping you distinguish right from wrong. And you may not want anything to do with the Bible, but shadows of God’s law are still written on our hearts, Paul says, in our conscience.

So, Paul is saying, ‘don’t worry, if you reject the Bible, you won’t be judged by the Bible’. It’s worse than that! You’ll be judged by your own law, the law you *do* know exists. The rights and wrongs you expect others to follow and, deep down, that *you* know *you* should follow.

And that’s a problem because none of us live up to our standards. We say ‘don’t be judgy’ and judge those we think are judgmental. We say ‘you should be more tolerant’ at the same time as being intolerant of those who disagree with us. We say cheating and stealing is always wrong, except when it comes to home office and what goes on the tax return. So our own standards, our own law condemns us: we know what’s right but we don’t do it. And so, v12 again: ‘all who have sinned without the law *will also perish without the law*.’

It’s why Paul writes in v16 of ‘that day [the last day] when, according to my gospel, God judges *the secrets of men* by Christ Jesus.’ *The secrets* of men. All those times when we did, said, or thought something, that in the secret place of our hearts we knew to be wrong but we did it anyway; those things that in the secret place of our conscience we knew we *should* do, but didn’t. That secret tussle in our hearts - that tells us we know right and wrong - that’s what will condemn the unbelieving person, Paul says. They’ll be found guilty because they know they’re guilty.

But what if that’s you and you go, ‘yeh, but I don’t believe there *is* going to be a day of judgment. You religious types can live with a guilty conscience if you like, but not me’?

Well, firstly, true Christianity is not about burdening you with guilt - it’s the opposite. But secondly, do you really want to live in a world where everyone lived free of the thought of final judgment?

Because what if everyone did live life thinking, '*right* is what I can get away with'? Then what reason would the powerful have for not oppressing the weak, or the rich the poor, if they can get away with it? Well, no, you'd say, obviously there should be justice in this life. Sure, but what if there's not? What if they could, or do, get away with it? Do you like that idea? No. You want there to be some kind of ultimate accounting, don't you? Unless, of course, you're rich and powerful!

So if your world view doesn't square with one of your deepest desires, like for justice, wouldn't it be right to examine, and change, that world view?

To which the religious person might go, 'absolutely, you should become more like me.' To which Paul says, 'not so fast.'

Why religious moralism, 'I could *never* do something like that' can't help you
Verse 17, 'But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God…' So Paul turns to the person who *does* take the Bible seriously, who *is* religiously observant, who's proud of the fact they're a member of God's chosen people.

Which, in Paul's case, was Jewish. But today it could just as easily be someone who calls themselves a conservative Christian, couldn't it? Someone who has all their doctrine in a line, and doesn't just own a Bible, they quote it.

Verse 18, 'and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law.' So they're listening to sermons, and they like what they hear, 'Amen, preach it brother!' especially the hard bits! And, v19, 'If you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth…'

So, they're not just being *taught* the Bible, they're teaching it. They speak up in Bible study, they preach on a Sunday, or the Sabbath morning, they volunteer in Sunday school. Because they know the Bible is 'the embodiment of knowledge and truth'. And if only everyone else would live like this, everything would be better.

And they're not wrong, are they? Except, there's a darker side: A guide *to the blind.* A light to those *who are in darkness*. An instructor of *the foolish*. And the Bible tells us that apart from God we are blind, and we live like people stumbling around in the dark, and only the fool says in his heart, 'there is no God.' And yet, unless there is something greater humbling you, that can rapidly morph into a sense of moral superiority, can't it. And if you lean politically to the left, you can't believe how those on the right behave, because you would never do that. And for those on the right, you can't believe the stupidity, the blindness of those on the left.

And that's the problem, Paul says, because what are you relying on? What are you trusting in? Verse 17, 'But if you call yourself a Jew *and rely on the law…'* And v19, 'if you are *sure* that you yourself are a guide to the blind…' So what are you relying on? The law. What are you placing your confidence - *your sureness* - in? That you're better than others. In other words, you're trusting in your own morality. That's what you think will get you through the day of judgement.

So let me ask you: what would you say it was for you? If the last judgment were to happen today what would you rely on? What would you be sure of? What would your confidence before God be in?

You see, if the moral relativist is going to be judged by their own standards, and be found wanting, is the religious moralist any more secure?

And to bring that home, Paul asks four rhetorical questions. Question 1: v21, 'You then who teach others, do you not teach yourself?' Answer, of course I do. Sure, but do you live up to your own teaching?

Because, question 2: v21 'While you preach against stealing, do you steal?' And it's not hard to find stories in the press of pastors, or priests, or church treasurers who have pocketed the offerings, or fiddled their expenses.

Or question 3: v22, 'You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?' And again, just look at the long list of pastors who have fallen morally to find the answer.

And yet, Paul's saying more than that isn't he? He's probing deeper than a few bad apples. And last week, Mark reminded us of Jesus' sermon on the mount - that it's not just physically killing someone, or physically committing adultery, that's the problem. It's what's going on in all our hearts, that's the issue. And you may never kill anyone, but do you ever get so frustrated or angry with someone that you could throttle them, or that the world would be a better place, or your life a happier life, if they weren't in it?

And you may never commit adultery, but have you ever undressed a woman in your mind. And sure you don't steal, or shoplift… but again, what about your expenses, or tax return, or home office-ing?

And you read the Sermon on the Mount and you think - no one lives like this, not perfectly. 'Correct', Paul says. 'No-one does. So why are you relying on the law and putting your confidence in your own morality? Those things are like umbrellas, made of paper, while all the time the storm of final judgment is barreling towards you.

But then there's Question 4: v22, 'You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?' Now, the first part's easy, isn't it: Jewish people were practically defined by not worshipping idols, by abhorring them. But robbing temples? Is Paul suggesting they railed against idols during the day, but at night they snuck out on secret missions to grab an idol for themselves?

No. It's that the religious person can be just as guilty of worshipping idols as any pagan, except at least the pagan is honest about it. Because what were the idols of ancient Rome? Gods of power and good harvest, gods of family and prosperity. Gods of protection and good health. And you criticise your neighbour for bowing down and making offerings to those idols, Paul says. But aren't you trusting in exactly those same things to give you the life you want? It's just your neighbour has the honesty to actually take the god a gift and admit it in public!

So Paul is saying that the law that the moralistic person thinks condemns others, also condemns them. Because none of us - neither the relativist nor the moralist - live up to the standards we know

in our hearts. We all fail. And as a result, at least for the religious person, v24, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." Because we may not see our hypocrisy, but others can. And it's not attractive, is it?

So… if 'you do you' and 'don't be judgy' doesn't work, and if 'I would never do that' moralistic religion can't help, what can?

What Does Work

And in v25-29 Paul takes what, as first sight, seems an odd turn. Verse 25, 'For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.'

Why bring up circumcision? What's that got to do with surviving the last judgment? Well, circumcision was *the* identity marker of being a member of God's covenant people. And in Genesis 17, God appears to Abram and says to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, *that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly*" (17:1-2). So God will make Abram's family great, if Abram will walk before God blameless. That's the covenant. That's the agreement.

Now today, we sign our agreements, don't we? You take out a mobile phone contract, or a mortgage, and at the bottom you sign. Back then, you cut a covenant. You'd take some animals, cut them in half, walk between them and say, let this be done to me if I fail to keep this covenant.

And circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with Abraham, v10: 'This is my covenant, which you shall keep… every male among you shall be circumcised.'

In other words - circumcision is the sign: this is what will happen to me if I fail to keep this covenant - *I* will be cut off.

But think: what did the covenant require of Abraham and his descendants? 'Walk before me blameless.' And blameless is binary isn't it? You either are or you aren't. Because God doesn't say, 'walk before me *a bit* blameless, on your good days, on days beginning with the letter T.' No, walk before me faultless, with no double standards and no hidden motives, with no secret sins and no hypocrisy, with no preaching against idols but trusting them anyway.

And we go, 'no one lives like that.' Exactly, Paul says. Circumcision has no power to save you. It's just an outer sign. And sin while you're circumcised and you might as well be uncircumcised. While, v26, 'If a man who is *uncircumcised* keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?' Because it's not the external sign that ultimately matters, Paul says, it's the inner reality, the blameless heart the covenant and it's sign are pointing us to.

Verses 28-29, 'For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, *and circumcision is a matter of the heart,* by the Spirit, not by the letter.'

In other words, it's not religious moralism you need, it's not trying to obey the letter of the law - it's a transformed heart.

But where do you get that if trying harder to obey the law doesn't do it? Well, go back to verse 16: 'On that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.' And ask yourself, why is God judging us by Christ Jesus *gospel*? What's good news about being judged by him?

Well, what if the judge was judged for you? What if he paid the penalty for your failure to keep God's law or your own standards? What if he wasn't just your judge but your defence attorney? Because listen to what Paul writes to the Colossians: '*In him also* you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, *by the circumcision of Christ*' (Col 2:11).

When was Jesus circumcised? As a baby? Sure. But is that what Paul's getting at? Because when was Jesus *cut off*? When, in the words of Isaiah the prophet, was he '*cut off* out of the land of the living'? When at the cross the heavens went dark and he cried out 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' And he was cut off from his Father and the heavens shut to his cries as he took all of our failure upon himself.

Because if physical circumcision involves flesh and knife and blood, at the cross Christ's flesh was pierced by nails and cut by spear, and his blood was shed, as he was cut off for us. And he became the curse of the covenant for us. And he, the only blameless one, was cut off, that we the guilty might be brought in. He was severed that we might be saved.

Rely on him, Paul is saying. Put your confidence in him. And as you do, your heart will be transformed. In at least three ways.

Firstly, you'll want to obey God. Not to earn his favour, but because in Christ you already have it. And as a result, you'll live a more consistent and coherent life.

Secondly, instead of God's name being blasphemed because of you, you'll want it to be praised. So you'll talk to others, not about how much better you are than others, but that despite all of your failures, Christ the judge was judged for you. Which is good news for relativists and the moralists.

But thirdly, it'll radically change whose praise you're living for. Because for the person who's relying on Christ, Paul says, v29, 'His praise is not from man but from God.' Because whether you're a relativist or a moralist, you'll always be worried about what other people think of you, won't you: are you being progressive enough, or conservative enough? Are you supporting the right causes and condemning the right people? And sometimes that desire to impress can make us do the right thing, but just as often it'll make you do the wrong thing.

But when you know what Christ thinks of you, when you know he was cancelled and cut off for you, when it's his approval and commendation you're living out of, you won't make the moral compromises you're tempted to make to win the approval of others. Instead, you'll increasingly live the truly morally courageous life - even if it costs you.