

**The Gospel as it Really Is:
Romans Simply Explained
Romans 2:17-3:8
Religion can't save you!
Preacher: Pastor Roy Summers**

Introduction

In the 1950s, when my mother and father worked as missionaries in North India they came across two groups of people. The first group had never heard of Jesus before: the Good News was brand new to them. The second group were “nominal Christians.”

What's a nominal Christian? Well, their great great grandparents heard the Gospel many years before—and truly believed the message. Some of the next generation also believed. Succeeding generations called themselves “Christian”, but more from tradition than from personal conviction. And so it went on until everyone in the family called themselves “Christian” but if you spent a single day with them, there was little or nothing in their speech or behaviour that would indicate living faith: they had become “nominal Christians,” religious people.

In every family, town, city, nation, where the Gospel has been preached, the same thing is prone to happen—over the generations, true and living faith in Jesus Christ goes to seed. People continue to tick the “Christian box” on the census—46% of people in our nation still do that—but if you spent a week with them, in their homes, their words and deeds would sadly not bear out their profession.

Now if you ramp “nominal religion” up ten times, you have the situation among the Jews which the apostle Paul describes in the verses before us in Romans chapters 2 and 3.

Paul is an insider, he knows the spiritual condition of the Jews. He knows they are far away from God: but because they are God's chosen nation they believe God that will give them a free pass to heaven! They won't even have to show their passport, God will wave them through paradise customs like royalty!

Paul needs to show these religious men and women that *they* need the Gospel just as much as the godless pagans “out there.”

We're making our way through Paul's letter to the Romans, the book that sums up the message of Christianity perhaps better than any other. We're in chapters 2 & 3 and Paul is still setting foundations; he hasn't been able to lay down Gospel bricks yet. What are the foundations of the Gospel?

"Jews and Gentiles alike are under sin" (3:9)

Everyone in the world, me, you and everyone else, is a sinner, who needs the forgiveness God offers as a free gift through Jesus Christ!

Before Paul can get to this Good News he needs to demonstrate, convince, convict *absolutely everyone in the world* that they are sinners.

But religious people—especially Jewish religious people - are hard to convince that they are sinners! Gentile people presented with Paul's list in sins in chapter 1 are likely to admit "guilty as charged" but not religious people, especially not religious Jews. So today we watch how Paul convicts religious people that they are sinners –it's quite brutal; then we'll hear 4 objections from them; and then we ask "what does this all mean for me and you, on Palm Sunday, 2025?"

Buckle up! Paul dives straight in!

Paul convicts the Jew

(1) ...you are hypocrites!

Verse 17 "Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth...."

The Jew saw himself at the top of the pile spiritually. But continues Paul in verse 21,

"...you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit

adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law?... As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

There they were:

- Preaching *against stealing* but stealing themselves! *What hypocrites!*
- Preaching *against adultery* but engaging in sexual sin themselves! *What hypocrites!*
- Preaching *against all those idols* out there, in the pagan world, but they weren't treating God's own temple with respect—I believe that's what "robbing temples" means. The prophet Malachi chastised God's people for robbing God and his temple: "*Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?' "In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse (that is the temple)" (Mal. 3)*
- They were pointing out the folly of *pagan idol worship* but weren't respecting *true worship*. *What hypocrites!*

In summary, verse 23, they were *bragging about the law* but breaking those very laws themselves. *What hypocrisy!*

Verse 24: "As it is written, God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

You're hypocrites! Strong language because religious people refuse to admit they are sinners. Paul hasn't finished:

(2) You trust in empty religious rituals!

God gave Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, a special sign to show he was one of God's chosen people: Circumcision. And every male Jew carried the sign on his body of this spiritual privilege. But over time, circumcision became an empty ritual, listen: "*Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised.*" Circumcision is like a **wedding ring**, a symbol of faithfulness between a husband and a wife. But if a couple are not faithful to each other the ring is worthless! In fact a couple who don't have the ring but are faithful to one another are "more married" than those people with rings!

Verse 26, “ if those who are not circumcised keep the law’s requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker. A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.”

Circumcision is meant to be an outward sign of an inward change of heart, which leads to a new life of humble contrite obedience towards God, but it had become an empty ritual.

You’re trusting in an empty religious ritual!

Paul knows how offended religious Jews will be to what he has just said; he knows what arguments they’re going to throw back at him. He anticipates 4 kickbacks, because, what do they say in war? Offence is the best form of defence! We learn from these 4 objections, these kickbacks, just how hard it is to win religious people to the Gospel. Pray for them, don’t give up on them! Bear with me as I explain!

Kickback 1: “What’s the point of being a Jew?” If having the Bible and being circumcised gets us nowhere what’s the advantage of being a Jew?”

“What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.”

Paul is going to work out the whole Jewish / Gentile thing in chapters 9-11, we’re going to have to wait for that; here he points out just one advantage of being Jew—you had God’s precious Word! Amazing, since the days of Abraham only one nation possessed the words of God, the Old Testament!

Kickback 2: “If the Jews are failures, as you say, doesn’t that make God a failure to, because he made all these wonderful promise and plans to the Jews which he hasn’t been able to carry out” Doesn’t that make God faithless? He hasn’t been able to carry out his plans? Because his people failed? Once again Paul is going to explain more

about that in chapters 9-11, but for now he must say “God is always faithful.”

Verses 3-4 “What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God’s faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar. As it is written: “So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.” (3-4)

Kickback 3: “It looks like Jewish failure makes God look good! So how come he judges us for something that does him a good turn?”

When we fail, but God doesn’t, our failure shows up his faithfulness—like a ketchup stain on a white T shirt brings out how white the shirt is. So you could say that Jewish failure actually does God a good turn! In which case how can God judge us for our sins since they benefit him?!

Verses 5-6 “But if our unrighteousness brings out God’s righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world?”

If God treats the sins of the Jews as a “special case” because their sin shows up his faithfulness, if he overlooks their sin, how can he be the Righteous Judge of the whole world?

Kickback 4 is just plain slander.

Kickback 4: “If our failure glorifies God, well why don’t we just keep on with this “OK sinning” because good seems to be coming out of our sin!”

“Someone might argue, “If my falsehood enhances God’s truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?” Why not say—as some slanderously claim that we say—“Let us do evil that good may result”?

Paul’s not even going to answer this slander, because everyone knows this line of reasoning is twisted.

“Their condemnation is just” (deserved)(8)

What these four torturous kickbacks demonstrate is just how resistant religious people are accepting that they are sinners in need of forgiveness. Paul found that 2000 years ago, my parents found that 70 years ago, and you and I will find that today.

This is shocking—in my mother’s letters back home, she complained—number of occasions—against the evangelists! Paid to share the Gospel but were completely apathetic; true religion even amongst us evangelicals can go to seed.

How does this all apply to us, on Palm Sunday, 2025?

Strange it may seem to say, but this is an apt sermon for Palm Sunday. On this day we remember how Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, surrounded by joyful crowds. But why was he riding into Jerusalem? A dangerous city filled with the hatred of the religious leaders?

He was coming to Jerusalem to die! Why die? Why give up his life? One reason and one reason alone. Because we are sinners, everyone one of us. Separated from God because of our sins. If we are to be reconciled to God, our sin must be paid for. And that’s what Jesus doing on Good Friday, he was paying the terrible penalty for all our sins

“Jesus himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.” (1 Peter 2:24)

And becoming gloriously undead three days later on Easter Sunday he would demonstrate that the great debt of my sin, your sin, had been paid—in full! Suppose, in the manner of a parable, when you knock on heaven’s door an angel asks “why should I let you in?”

- If you say “because I have lived a good life” the door will be closed, eternally.
- If you say “because I was religious, I was born in a Christian country, taken to local church as a child, sang in the choir, regular church-goer, and so on,” the door will be closed to you as well—that’s the shocking news for religious people, including evangelical-religious people: if you say to the angel, “let me in because I went to a good Bible teaching church, I was a Sunday school teacher, deacon or elder, whatever—that’s why you should let me in” you too will be turned away!
- There’s is only one key that unlocks the gates of the glorious eternal city, and it’s this, “Please let me in, because though I was and am a poor sinner, in thought, in word

and deed, I believe that Jesus paid for my every sin on Good Friday and rose on Easter Sunday to give me eternal life. And I trust in him alone.”

May God show every one of us that we are sinners, and may he lead us to trust in Jesus Christ, alone.