

Introduction

- **Labels tell a story.** Ralph Lauren says “preppy and expensive.” Chick-fil-A says “quality service and closed on Sundays.” Starbucks says “I’ll gladly wait thirty minutes for overpriced burnt coffee.” Carolina Gamecocks says, “I’ve chosen a life of suffering.”
- We live in a world obsessed with labels. But labels can lie. You can wear a Nike sweatshirt and never work out. You can dress like you’re wealthy but be drowning in debt. You can even wear the label “Christian” and never actually know Christ.
- Is Christianity merely a label for you? Or, is your faith in Christ an all-consuming, life-transforming relationship with God that you can’t help but share with others?
- That’s exactly what Paul confronts in [Romans 2:17–29](#). He’s speaking to religious people—folks who know their doctrine, talk about God, and wear the label of faith—but whose hearts are far from Him. They don’t want people transformed by the Gospel; they just want people to wear their label.
- From this passage, I want to ask three questions that help us move beyond religion as a label—and toward a faith that truly transforms lives.

What do we really want from people?

- [Romans 2](#) is a wake-up call for religious people. You can claim the label “faith in God” and not actually live by faith. Paul calling out religious Jews for their dependence on their religion instead of dependence on

the Messiah - people who took the moral high ground and looked down on others. Paul reminded them they were just as guilty of God's judgment as anyone else.

- vs. 17 - "If you call yourself a Jew" - badge of honor. Some would use *Jew* almost as a surname - Introduce themselves, "Peter, Jew."
- Religious Jews saw themselves as privileged people., The entire Old Testament of God's work among the Jewish people. The Jews were chosen by God to be a holy nation from whom He would bring His Messiah. That's privilege!
- Paul lists "boasts" of religious Jews by which they thought they would NOT be judged like the Gentiles:
 - Rely on the law - God had chosen to reveal Himself to them at Sinai. (e.g., exposure to the Law)
 - Brag about relationship with God - God was their Father. They didn't turn to pagan idols like the Gentiles. (At least not in Paul's day.)
 - They know His will - What other group of people had Scripture from God?
 - They approve what is superior - Eat the right foods, follow the levitical laws in Torah, etc.
 - Instructed by the Law - loved having the instructions of God, but they failed to obey.
- The religious Jews could brag about these things, but it still didn't change the fact that they had rejected God's Messiah.
- The Jews who thought of themselves as God's privileged people were to be a light to the world, but what light were they shining? It wasn't the light of Jesus.
- vs. 19-20 - Religious Jews convinced they were a guide, a light, instructor, a teacher, etc., but what were they actually teaching?

- Or, what did they really want for people? What do religious people who simply wear the label of *faith* actually want for people?
- A good question for you: What do you really want for people? If you're merely religious - someone who wears the "label" of Christian rather than actually following Jesus, what do you want for people?
- What religious people want for people:
 - **Live for what I think is important.** Keep the rules I think are important. Conform to my way of thinking about the world. Do the things I think you should do: be moral, be aligned to the political party I think you should belong to.
 - **Tell me I'm right.** Tell me my way of thinking is superior. Tell me I'm doing the right things. Affirm my ways.
- Religious people are far more interested in seeing others conform to their ways instead of being transformed by the grace of God.

What do people really see from us?

- Paul now exposes religious hypocrisy. The Jews claimed to know God's will, but they didn't live it. They preached against sin while practicing it, and their double standard dishonored God among the nations.
- Paul has already told the religious Jews that they do the same things as pagan Gentiles (2:1).
- Now, Paul gets more specific. vs. 21 - "You teach others, but you don't teach yourself..." Or, don't live out the instructions from the Torah that they teach to others. Tell others not to steal, yet they were thieves. Tell others to not commit adultery, yet they committed adultery. They robbed temples - Involved in commerce around idol temple worship? Doing business with idolaters? Directly profiting?

- vs. 23 - Boat in the law yet break it - Then an indicting statement in vs. 24 - a quote from [Isaiah 52:2](#). The religious Jews in Paul's day were no different than the Jews who rebelled against God before the exile - their rebellion led them into exile. The religious Jews in Paul's day had not learned from their forefathers. As a result, they blasphemed God among the Gentiles.
- Just as Israel's hypocrisy made God's name mocked among the Gentiles, our inconsistency can make the Gospel unbelievable to the watching world.(E.g., Ravi Zacharias)
- Every time a believer talks about holiness but lives in hidden sin, the world sees religion, not redemption. Think of the damage caused when high-profile leaders fall; it shakes the world's confidence in the Gospel.
- Do people see you as hypocritical or devoted? If hypocritical, you're not helping the cause of Christ. You're likely pushing people away from Jesus instead of helping them to see the light of Jesus. You're not helping us as a church to live on mission.
 - **Examine your integrity.** Integrity = When your beliefs, actions, and words line up consistently even when it costs you. Where do your actions not line up with your words? A good test of integrity: Are you the same person in private as you are in public?
 - **Be honest about compromises.** Moral failures don't necessarily happen in one moment, but after many moments of small compromises. Choosing to be influenced by media, choosing that small stretch of the truth, choosing to let your eyes linger longer than you should... Those small compromises can lead to moral failure. Those small compromises matter.
- Maybe today what people see from you isn't passion for Jesus but the cracks of hypocrisy. Don't hide them—bring them into the light. The good news is, Jesus doesn't expose hypocrisy to shame you but to *heal* you, to make your heart whole again.

What does God really want from us?

- Circumcision - the physical mark on the body of a Jewish man that proved he belonged to the covenant people of God. It was a big deal!
- For Paul: “So what if you’re circumcised if you don’t keep the law.” (vs. 25) From Paul’s perspective, if you don’t keep the Law, you’re actually uncircumcised. Paul to religious Jews: Circumcision serves no purpose if you don’t live devoted to God.
- vs. 26-27 - Someone who lives devoted to God yet is physically uncircumcised yet keeps the law is a judge of religious Jews. In other words, their faith reveals the lack of faith of the religious Jew thus heaping judgment on the religious Jew.
- vs. 28 - a shocking statement: Jewishness isn’t about your ethnic identity. Jewishness IS an ethnic identity - but catch Paul’s point. Jewishness = God’s chosen, covenant people. If that’s true - true Jewishness is an inward condition of the heart - and circumcision is a matter of the heart, not an outward mark on the body. A matter of the heart brought about by the Spirit, not by letter (relying on a written word that showed them their sins but didn’t save them from their sins).
- The letter (law) might cause us to polish our behavior but the Spirit gives us a new nature. Salvation and sanctification flow from God’s indwelling Spirit, not mere external conformity to the Law. A heart change brought about by the Spirit of God is the true mark of God’s people - not outward circumcision.
- An inward transformation of the heart where one longs to hear the praise of the Father - “well done good and faithful servant” rather than the praise of people.
- God doesn’t want your religious performance, your church attendance, your attempt to conform people to your way of thinking, etc. He doesn’t want you to wear Christianity as a label. God wants your heart.

- This morning, the Holy Spirit is challenge you to:
- **Exchange the label for the Gospel.** What outward marks are you relying on to prove that you're spiritual? Church attendance? Giving? Volunteering? These are good things but with a heart yielded to the Spirit, they're religious stickers on an unchanged heart. (A wedding ring on the finger while being unfaithful to your spouse - the ring doesn't make the marriage. The relationship does.)
- Your label does not save you nor does your label lead others to salvation. What saves you is the Good News that Jesus has come to give you a new heart through His death and resurrection. The reason God can give you a new heart isn't that you tried harder—it's that Jesus gave His. He was cut off so you could be brought in. His blood, not your label, makes you belong. Today, believe that Jesus died and rose again for you. Repent of your sins and give your life to Him.
- **Live for the “well done” of the Father not for the “well done” of others.** At the end of the day, the only well done you need to hear is that of your heavenly Father as He sees that you've lived your life devoted to Him. If you're chasing the praise of man rather than the praise of God, you're just a label wearer.
- **Remember that God uses changed people to change people.** Conforming people to your label will only make them on religious people on the way to hell. God wants to change people, not make people religious. And He wants to use you in His work of redemption. God uses a changed life - as you live out a life changed by the Spirit, you will see God use you. God has extended grace to you so that through you He might extend grace to someone else.