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Hopefully at all of our locations you were handed one of these reference sheets—The Gospel Versus Religion reference sheet by our friend Tim Keller. This was designed to be used as an insert in your Recalibrate journal. I think it will be a helpful resource for today’s message as well as just pulling it out and referencing it throughout the duration of this series that we are in. And if you are joining us online, we will drop the link to the digital version of this in the chat so that way you can have access to it as well.

If you have a Bible or a Bible app, go ahead and find Romans, chapter 2. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover in chapters 2 and 3 together today, so I just want to jump right in with this.

Not long ago our family sat down to have a meal at a local restaurant and like many places, they were looking for extra help and so they were short-handed. And our waitress was doing an amazing job, but she was stretched to the limit. And you could tell that she was really frazzled.

At the end of the meal, I said, “We’re ready for our bill.” And she said, “Well, some people from your church already took care of it.” And I said, “Well...” and I have no idea who these people are, totally anonymous. I still don’t know. And I said, “Man, that was very nice of them.”

And then I asked her this question. I said, “Well, did they take care of you? Did they tip you?” And she said, “Well, not really.” And I was like, “Ahhhh.” And then she said, “What church do you pastor?” “College Park Church, Pastor Mark Vroegop.”

Mark is a great friend and I love College Park so I can use that. In fact, Mark and I moved to Indy about the same time and so we like to joke that over our 14 years here that we’ve been able to pastor a lot of the same people because there has been so much church hopping back and forth, but I’m not bitter, alright? I only joke around people I love.

There is a book that I have in my office entitled unChristian. And in it it presents the results of this nation-wide survey that the Barnum Group did by comparing Christians and non-Christians to see.... We know that there are differences in belief, but what are the actual, tangible, day-to-day differences in the way that we live our lives? Are there any?

Now, just so you know they only interviewed people, as Christians, who could articulate the Gospel message, saved by grace alone through faith alone through Christ alone, and affirm their acceptance of it in order to weed out the “in-name-only” Christmas and Easter folks, alright?

The survey was completely anonymous so that way they would be honest about the way that they live their lives. And here was just a sprinkling of some of the results. The question was:

What are the distinct differences between the way that we actually live our lives? Here's what they found:

Christians cuss less—in public. Just as much in private, which means when you're around your pastor or around Grandma, you watch your language.

They are less likely to recycle, because Jesus is just going to beam us up out of here anyway.

They give a little bit more to the poor, but not much.

And they buy fewer lottery tickets.

There you have it. Now, Christians, it goes on to say, were just as likely as non-Christians to get drunk; do illegal drugs or take prescription drugs not prescribed to them; visit porn sites; lie to get out of a difficult situation; intentionally get revenge on someone who wronged them in the past 30 days; say something unkind, unfair, untrue about someone behind their back in the last month.

In the study, 84 percent of non-Christians said they knew at least one believer personally, but only 15 percent thought that that person's lifestyle was significantly different than their own.

One non-Christian described his perception of Christians as: illogical, mean-spirited, anti-science, hypocritical, judgmental, overly political, and people who don't play nice with those who don't believe what they believe.

Now, we can certainly factor in that there are a lot of mischaracterizations out there about Christians in the media and in the movies, as well as the vocal minority who sort of mess it up for the rest of us. However, we need to own much of this because, after all, what was in the survey was quote/unquote self-reported—meaning we were telling on ourselves.

And I don't know, I think it's just me, but I think Jesus had something else entirely in mind when He went to a cross to give us a new identity, don't you?

Like in Matthew, chapter 28, when Jesus said, "Go into all of the world and make disciples," and in John 13 when He said, "They will know us by our love," I think that He meant more than buy fewer lottery tickets and cuss less around Nanna.

See, the Bible says over and over, in a variety of ways, that as Christ followers we are to be set apart from the rest of the world. But listen, in the best sense of that word. Not set apart like angry, not set apart like judgmental, not set apart fearful, but the Bible gives us this really helpful metaphor—you are to be salt and light.

Well, what does that mean? Salt adds flavor to food, but in the first century, salt was a preservative because they didn't have refrigeration systems and freezers. So when He says, "Be

salt," it's to preserve the values of the kingdom coming. And when He says, "Be light," He means be a light in a really, really dark place. Be in the world, but not of it.

He says, "When you speak in eloquent tongues like angels, but you don't have love, you are just a clanging symbol." In fact, it is such a big theme throughout the Bible, you just can't get away from.

And I said this last week. When God evaluates your life and mine, He's not looking for an external conformity to a religion or a set of beliefs, but an inward transformation of the heart, which should then affect the way that we live and the way that we treat others.

Now, if you're just joining us, we are three weeks deep into this study in the book of Romans. And we are saying, Romans, what it does is that it recalibrates our lives back to True North. It's this idea that all of us have these internal compasses, it's the way that we discern what is right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust.

And all of us right now, our compasses are calibrated in slightly different directions. We are massively divided. And we've got a perspective and an opinion on all kinds of issues under the sun and we're pretty sure that our perspective is the right one.

But we at least need to acknowledge that there is a certain voice or set of voices that inform the perspective that we have. And what we need to do, as Christ followers, periodically—and more and more increasingly in these days—is to recalibrate our compasses to ask ourselves, "Do the inputs that I am receiving sound anything at all like the voice of Jesus?"

And a fancy word for this, the theological word, is Lordship. And it's a real struggle because all of us, we want Jesus, but we also want to live the life that we want to live. And Lordship is basically this idea that eventually, at some point, the voice of Jesus and the corrupted desires of our hearts will come into conflict—daily.

And in those moments, we've got a decision to make. We can either choose to reject Jesus and walk away, and God will give the freedom to do that, it's called free will, or we can redirect our lives, recalibrate back to True North. And the Bible's word for that is repentance. It just means turn around.

Or here's what is happening increasingly more these days, not just non-Christians, but professing Christians, are saying, "Let me reshape Jesus and His words to fit the life that I want to live."

And this goes back to this deceptive question that our enemy threw out to our great grandparents in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3, it's simply this, "Did God really say?" Here's how that question gets manifested today, "Well, I know the Bible says this, but it couldn't possibly literally mean it." Like, "Here's what the Bible says today, but here's what it means to me." Or "You know what? We need to drag it kicking and screaming into the modern era." It is around

that same question, Satan will go after the Word and the words of God. And this is how you get a book like unChristian.

For many of us, what the Bible teaches about all kinds of issues—let's just take the top two: human sexuality and financial generosity—is absolutely foreign to so many of us because our internal compasses have been and continue to be calibrated in the exact opposite direction of the wisdom of God's Word on those subjects. And I just want you to know that there is a deceiver behind all of it.

So let me give you an example of what I mean. Last week I mentioned the sexual revolution ideology of the last 50 years and it encouraged and it even promised us more liberation and fulfillment, "You don't need to be confined by this little box, you just do you. You just follow the desires of your heart. You have the right to do that. You'll be more fully human if you can just express yourself in all of those ways."

And here's what we're finding 50 years into this, the exact opposite is happening and the science on this is just now beginning to emerge. Here's what I mean. The research on the two chemicals that are released by our bodies during sexual intimacy, oxytocin and vasopressin, those things bring our attachment system online and it causes us to bond to another person. So now it seems that the more sexual partners you have, the less capacity your body has for intimacy.

Maybe God knew what He was talking about after all. So when He says, "Save yourself for marriage between a man and a woman in a permanent relationship," either God is being a prude or He is saying, "No, here's how to have the best sex of your life."

The irony of a few years ago is that the "Me Too" movement was dominating the headlines, at the exact same time the Fifty Shades of Gray trilogy, a story about male sexual domination, by the way, was becoming the highest selling book series of the decade and one of the highest grossing film franchises of all time. Those two things were happening simultaneously. There is a deceiver behind all of it promising you fulfillment and stealing your soul.

Yet when we are challenged as Christ followers about giving a reason for the hope that we have, oftentimes we're flat-footed and we just don't know how to respond.

So right now if you believe that Jesus is God's Son and He's the only way to salvation and you believe that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God, you are what sociologists call a cognitive minority. And as a result, we are under constant pressure. Do you feel it? You can feel it everywhere: at work, in social circles, from the left and the right, conservatives to progressives to assimilate and follow the crowd.

And Jesus refuses to be reshaped to fit our agenda. In the first century during His earthly ministry the political and social groups of His day, the Pharisees and Sadducees, they constantly wanted Him to be their champion and Jesus refused to do it.

Jesus refuses to be a poster boy for our agenda, a champion for the lifestyle we really want to live, or a means to our political end. Jesus did not come to take sides. But in the words of the great theologian, Conner McGregor, He came to take over.

So, if you remember from our short history lesson from the Old Testament book of Daniel last week, Daniel and his three friends, Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego were exiles in a foreign land, yet they resolved to live for God in an ungodly culture.

King Nebuchadnezzar wanted to indoctrinate them into the ideology of the Babylonian culture. So they found themselves at odds with the culture, but they chose to live their lives in a way that was distinct, that was markedly different. And as a result it was winsome. It earned the respect of Nebuchadnezzar and the other Babylonians. In other words, here's what they did. They allowed the character of Jesus to be on full display in their lives. And that is always winsome.

And it turns out that America 2021 A.D. has a lot in common with Babylon 600 B.C. And just like Daniel and his friends, you and I as Christ followers, we are exiles in a foreign land. Our citizenship is in heaven.

The word for this is Ambassador. An ambassador is somebody who is a representative of his nation, his country, in a foreign land. He is in that land, but not of it. He is representing the values of his homeland.

We are here to represent the values of the Kingdom of God that is coming into this world, which, by the way, God loves, and He died for. So we don't resent it. We don't rage against it. We're not fearful of it—our hearts are broken in compassion over the condition of it.

And the Barnum Group called this cultural moment that we are living in right now:

### Digital Babylon

Which means this. Prior to the internet, like when I grew up in the 80s and 90s, in order to feel this kind of pressure of being an exile you had to go to a liberal university or move to a world class city like London or New York. But today, as author John Mark Comer says, all you need is an iPhone and Wi-Fi access. The values of Babylon are in our pockets and on our screens discipling us away from confidence in and faithfulness to Jesus 24/7.

And we have an incredible opportunity right now, right in front of us, as Christ followers, to shine brightly in a really dark world or (and I'm afraid that maybe too much of this has happened in the last 18 months) we just blend into the darkness by mirroring the anger, the division, the confusion, and the fear that we see everywhere else. So why would somebody come here?

Here's the question that is I'm just wrestling with right now in this season of my life. It's when people say, "Why would you come to be a part of a church, why would you tune into a church, if all you're going to see, hear, and experience is the same thing that you see everywhere else?" So

churches that are trying to reshape the words of Jesus to be more palatable to culture, there's nothing distinct about them.

I'm a little bit taken a back. Last week, in Romans, chapter 1, I was most nervous about preaching that message out of this whole series. And I came here not really knowing what to expect. And I was like, "Well, let me throw myself into traffic and see what happens." And it's been amazing to me, in this last week, the amount of encouragement that I've received from people. And, that message has gotten five times the number of views online than what a typical message does. And I'm trying to figure out why.

There are only a couple of reasons. I suspect that you weren't really listening. That's always possible. But the other thing is that I think that people are coming to this realization that the ideology of our culture has promised much, delivered very little. And people are like, "Have you got anything else? I am so empty. And I've been chasing after all of these promises of fulfillment, and they are not fulfilling me. And, you know what? Romans 1 sounds super weird and slightly offensive, but it's different."

And as your pastor, I'm just under the increasing conviction, as well as is our team here, that we just need to equip you to live in Digital Babylon, to not only get you to Jesus but to provide tools, resources, and encouragement so that you might stay faithful to Him in the midst of increasing pressure not to. That's what this series is about. That's what the journals that we're giving away to you are about and the little handout that we've given you.

Listen. I would never expect the world to follow a set of kingdom values that they never signed up for. What I mean is, if you're here or if you're tuning in and listening and you're not a Christian, you're not a Christ follower, I wouldn't expect you to act like one. However, I think that maybe you would want to if you met more genuine, humble, authentic Christ followers who live out those values in their lives.

And I am a pastor. I am not a pundit. I am not interested in legislating morality, but to help you to see Jesus for who He really is. Some of you might be a little disappointed in me after last week's message because you are like, "Aaron, I thought you might be more of a progressive pastor." And I am. I want to help you progress more and more into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ.

The potential good news, are you guys ready for good news? We don't get that very often. The potential good news is that some of the darkest times in history usually precede a significant spiritual reawakening. And it turns out that a study of Romans has usually been involved in it.

So just to review, in chapter 1, Paul painstakingly explains the corruption within the human heart that we all need to be saved from. We are all in the same boat. And he lays out how all of us have been deceived into exchanging the truth of God for a lie. We worship created things rather than Creator God.

Now, in chapter 2, he's going to take aim at religion, and he is going to say that that is just as bad, if not worse, because religion is just a flimsy cover for a heart that is just as sinful and corrupt as anyone else's. Now, for some of you, what I just said is disorienting you. You're like, "What did you just say?"

Remember we have an enemy whose specialty is deception and counterfeit, and he is so sinister that his first plan is to get you to reject God. That's what he wants, ultimately. And he's like, "Let me just throw everything at you so that you'll reject God. Let me throw all of your questions, let me put some hypocritical Christians in your life who really hurt you, let me throw COVID and cancer at you, let me throw divorce and abuse at you and get you to be so angry and hurt and disillusioned that you'll reject God." That's his plan.

If he can't get you to do that, because you so stubbornly hold on to your belief in God, here's what he'll do. He'll just make you religious. And it is one of his most sinister forms of deception.

That's where this [handout] comes into play. Don't read it now because I've worked far too hard on this message for you to be reading this. So, take this with you and just read it later this afternoon and just pull it out occasionally and just rehearse it because it will help you see the difference between the Gospel and religion.

Now, remember that the church in Rome was very similar to our church today, massively influential, incredibly divided. And the division, primarily, was over the fact that half of the church of Rome had their internal compasses calibrated toward Gentile and the other half had them calibrated toward Jewish.

Now, for reference, every time Paul says Jew or Jewish in the book of Romans, you could substitute Evangelical, church-going Christian. And every time he says Gentile, you could substitute messy, cursing, jeans-wearing, AC/DC-listening, beer-drinking folk who didn't grow up in church but came to Christ later in life. And they were at odds with each other.

And the Jews would sit on one side of the room, and they would point at the Gentiles, and they would say, "How can you call yourself a Christian and not observe the Sabbath and not change your diet and not be circumcised?" And the Gentiles would come right back, and they would go, "How can you call yourself a Christian and be so legalistic and so confined by the Old Testament Law and be such a jerk?"

I might point out that maybe the easy solution for Paul when he writes this letter is that he could say, "Why don't you start a Jewish campus and why don't you start a Gentile campus?" But he goes, "No, you need to be united as one body." And he said, "The answer to both sectors is the Gospel of Jesus Christ." And he takes aim at religious behavior in chapter 2, starting in verse 17. Look at it with me:

*"You who call yourselves Jews," Evangelical, church-going Christians, "are relying on God's law, and you boast about your special relationship with him. You know what he wants; you know what is*

*right because you have been taught his law.” You went to Sunday School. “You are convinced that you are a guide for the blind and a light for people who are lost in darkness. You think you can instruct the ignorant and teach children the ways of God. For you are certain that God’s law gives you complete knowledge and truth. (NLT)*

In other words, what he just said is, “You think you’ve got an edge on all of the Gentiles because you grew up in church, attended mass, went to church camp, watched *Veggie Tales*, and participated in Bible Bowl. You’ve got all of this knowledge about God in your head, but the character of Jesus is strangely missing from your life. And there is a huge difference between having knowledge of and applying that knowledge.

So, it might be a surprise to some of you, I am not very flexible at all. I have super tight hamstrings, tight lower back, tight shoulders—causes problems everywhere. Don’t email me your solutions. I’ve heard it all. But I’m working on it. I’m working on it.

And my wife came to me this summer and she said, “Aaron. There’s this app that I just found, and I think you’ll really like it. It’s all of these stretches and exercises and these really beautiful people who are stretching on a beach, stretching on a mountain, and it’s so inspiring. I think you’ll really, really like it.” So, I downloaded it. She’s right. I really, really like it. It’s really, really well done. And I’ve used it twice. So understand that having the knowledge of God’s Word without allowing it to change the motivations of my heart, is thinking just because I downloaded the app, I’m now flexible. He goes on, verse 21:

*“Well then, if you teach others, why don’t you teach yourself?” That is a backhanded slap. “You tell others not to steal, but do you steal? You say it is wrong to commit adultery, but do you commit adultery? You condemn idolatry, but do you use items stolen from pagan temples?” I’m going to bring some clarity to that in a minute. “You are so proud of knowing the law, but you dishonor God by breaking it”.*

Now here’s the thing. Paul is throwing out these questions and I’m sure that in their minds they are sort of answering them. Like, “No. I don’t steal.” Here’s what he is saying, “You’re using religious behavior to cover up the motivations of your heart.” So in other words, maybe you’re not stealing but you’re not being generous. Same thing. You’re not trusting God in that area of your life.

You’re not literally having an affair, but you’re undressing that woman in the checkout aisle of Meijer, or you’re having an emotional affair with an old flame on Facebook. You’re not literally bowing to an idol, but listen, here’s the temple comment, you’re using God to get what you want, which is another form of idolatry.

Well, Aaron. What do you mean? Well, if you’ve ever had this thought (and I’ve had it) if this thought has crossed your mind, “God, I’ll give you my belief, I’ll give you an hour of my time on Sunday, I’ll serve you, I’ll give you a little bit of my money, if you could just give me a steady job,



decent health insurance, and a fiancée before Valentine's Day. And if not, what good are you?" That is idolatry.

Here's how you know you traded the Gospel for religion. If you are trying to get more things from God rather than getting more of God. Even peace. Like, "I just want more peace." Or "I just want more..." Listen. None of those things are bad but if you want those things more than God, Himself, it's idolatry. Verse 24:

*"No wonder the Scriptures say, 'The Gentiles blaspheme the name of God because of you.'"*

In other words, that's what we hear so often in our culture today—Christians are hypocrites. They don't actually live out what they believe. And Paul is saying the exact same thing. He's saying, "This is another way of saying, all of the waitresses know you just came from church, but you left a lousy tip."

All of the Gentiles, the unchurched, the non-Christians spend more than five minutes with you, and they can see past the flimsy cover of religion to a heart that is just as corrupt as anyone else's, and they are like, "Why would I go to church? That's just the same thing that I've already got." And it makes them want to vomit.

By the way, it makes Jesus want to vomit too. He said that to the church in Laodicea in Revelation, chapter 3. He goes, "Man, I just wish you were all in or all out. I wish you were hot or cold. But you're lukewarm." And lukewarm followers of Christ make Jesus want to puke. Verse 28:

*"For you are not a true Jew just because you were born of Jewish parents," in other words, you're not a true Christian just because you grew up in a church-going home, "or because you have gone through the ceremony of circumcision," because you went to church camp or Sunday school. "No, a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God." That's beneath behavior. That is motivation. "And true circumcision is not merely obeying the letter of the law; rather, it is a change of heart produced..." how? "... by the Spirit. And a person with a changed heart seeks praise from God, not from people."*

In other words, audience of one. Living my life for an audience of one.

Now, Paul is saying, "Beware of getting just enough religion that it inoculates you from the Gospel message and that's a challenge for anybody who grew up in church. Inoculation means you get a dead version of a disease so that when you're exposed to the real thing, you resist it.

Tim Keller describes it this way. He says:

"It is possible to trust in Christianity, rather than Christ. And this can happen in conservative, evangelical churches. Paul is showing us a condition called 'dead orthodoxy,' where the basic doctrines of the Bible are accurately subscribed to..."

In other words, you can regurgitate the Gospel message, "... but to not make any internal difference. There is an intellectual grasp of the gospel, but no internal revolution."

In other words, when we have a pandemic Christians are just as angry just as fearful just as divided and just as confused as the rest of the world. That's how you get there.

And honestly, I don't know what is more difficult. I've been in ministry over 20 years full-time. I've been preaching 20 some odd years. I don't know what is more difficult in preaching: helping an unchurched person see a need for Jesus or trying to help a churched person see a need for Jesus because he thinks he already knows and he's good. And usually this last group is a lot nastier with their criticism.

If you've noticed, the preaching helmet is not up here this week. I've graduated from that. But preaching a message like this, I need a bulletproof vest. And there is one under here. Because what I've learned is that some of the most hurtful arrows have come from church-going Christians.

One of the most difficult tensions for me to manage in being a pastor, and I've tried to wrestle with this over the years, is my heart just beats so hard for people who are outside of Jesus Christ, and I just want them to... I don't want them to stay away from church because they think the roof will cave in, I want them to come. I don't want to speak in Christian-ese that goes over their head. I want to, as Jude says, smell a little bit like smoke when I come into the gates of heaven because I was so close to the flames of hell trying to snatch people away and get them to Jesus. My heart just beats passionately for that.

But I've taken so many arrows for that over the years because people think that I'm just all about evangelism and I don't want to grow disciples deep. And that has hurt so much. And there is this tension that we're all going to have to manage in our church and I just want you to know what kind of a church that you're a part of—deep and wide. We're not going to do this false dichotomy thing of, "We're going to leave the 99 and go after the one. And you must not care about the 99," nonsense. There is this tension that we've got to face where we....

I would say that the best disciples are those who are seeking after those who need to know the Gospel as well. And I'm preaching another sermon right now.

So, we turn the corner in chapter 3 and here's what Paul does. He knows he's just offended the religious crowd. Kind of like what I've just done. And in the first eight verses, Paul gets into this imaginary argument with what he thinks their objections might be. It's beautiful.

And he goes, "I would imagine," because Paul is a Jew, by the way, he goes, "I would imagine here's what you are thinking." Verse 1 of chapter 3, "Well, Paul what's the advantage of being a Jew then? What's the advantage of being religious if that's the case?" And he would say, essentially, "Calm down. Great advantages to growing up in church, great advantages to be

taught the Bible stories, great advantages to Scripture memorization—listen, just don't think that you are saved because of it." Look at verse 9. Paul, speaking as a Jew, says:

*"Well then, should we conclude that we Jews are better than others? No, not at all, for we have already shown that all people, whether Jews or Gentiles..." churched and unchurched, "... are under the power of sin. As the Scriptures say, 'No one is righteous—not even one.'"*

Now righteousness refers to our legal standing before God. Sin has ruined that. And it is this sobering reality that there is going to come a day when everything about who we are will be fully revealed and nobody is going to look good. Not just behavior behind closed doors, but motivations behind your heart.

*Just think of the best person that you know, both in history and today, he's not going to look good either. Moses, Abraham, Daniel, Esther, Billy Graham, Mother Teresa, Mister Rogers, Oprah, your grandma—you'd be like, "Grandma, I can't believe you ever did that," nobody is going to look good on that day. Verse 11:*

*"No one is truly wise;" you might have more degrees than Fahrenheit behind your name, doesn't mean that it is translated into wisdom, "no one is seeking God."*

Whoa, whoa, whoa, you just went a little too far, "I'm in church right now. I'm seeking God." Are you? Or are you seeking what God can do for you? There is a subtle difference. Verse 12:

*"All have turned away; all have become useless."*

In other words, "Sin has corrupted my heart. Even the quote, unquote natural desires are disordered ones." Remember our definition of total depravity last week. You're not all bad. You've been created in the image of a good God, but you're not all good because you are sinful.

It's this understanding that... it's not my ignorance of God that gives me a hard heart, it's my hard heart that makes me ignorant of God.

*"No one does good, not a single one."*

Verse 13:

*"Their talk is foul, like the stench from an open grave."*

Now, he's not talking about cursing here as much as he's talking about this: what is in our hearts can be hidden for a time but eventually it will leak out to our words. The most revealing thing about the condition of your heart is your speech, so start paying attention to your words: gossip, slander, anger, pride, half-truths, rage, complaints.

Did you know that sociologists say that the number one predictor of divorce is the way that a couple talks to each other? Not the words, necessarily, but the tone, especially contempt, which is why—just a free little piece of advice, take it or leave it. Young ladies if you're looking for a man, pay attention to how he talks to his mom, and you'll know whether or not he's the one. Young men, if you're looking for a lady, pay attention to how she speaks about her friends and other ladies and then you'll know what's really in her heart.

He goes on, verse 13:

*"Their tongues are filled with lies." "Snake venom drips from their lips." "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." "They rush to commit murder. Destruction and misery always follow them. They don't know where to find peace." "They have no fear of God at all."*

That fear of God thing is the weightiness of God. What has more weight in your life? The authority of God or your own wants, needs, dreams, desires, and aspirations? It's like a scale. We put the weight on what we want more than on the identity of God. He goes, "That's our heart in a nutshell."

And then in verse 20 Paul tells us the function of the law. And when he says *law*, he's referring to the Old Testament laws. There were 613 of them. And then you can reduce it to the top 10, David Letterman style, the Ten Commandments. So when he says this, this is what he is talking about. He says in verse 20:

*"For no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands." This next sentence is so clarifying. "The law..." all 613 of them, "... shows us how sinful we are."*

So following the law, in other words, trying to be religious, doesn't cancel my sin it just reveals it. The law of God functions kind of like a mirror, revealing to me just how sinful I am. And by looking at it, I see what the condition of my heart should be and how short it falls. But the law can't do anything about your sinful heart.

The law is like an X-ray machine. An X-ray machine scans your arm to see that there is a broken bone inside, but the X-ray machine can't set your arm to bring healing. The law is like a thermometer that measures the spiritual condition of your heart, it is not a thermostat that can adjust it.

So forcing yourself to act more righteous, forcing yourself to be more religious, white-knuckling morality, attending church more regularly is never going to change your heart. It will just cover up the corruption and it always leads to one of two places, either spiritual pride because of what you've managed to accomplish in comparison to the worst people you know or utter despair because you can't possibly live up to it and you walk away and you say, "That's too oppressive and repressive and confining." And neither one is the Gospel message. You just rejected Jesus for all of the wrong reasons.

So let me see if I can illustrate this. Last week I came home, and my wife was in the kitchen with our refrigerator doors open and she pulled all of the food out and she was steam cleaning the fridge. And it was loud and honestly there was this funky smell in the air. She is like the hardest working person I know. She was in there steaming the... I'd never seen this before.

So I walk in and I'm like, "What are you doing?" And she goes, "Well, some milk exploded a couple of weeks ago, we didn't catch it, so all of this milk drifted down to the bottom of the fridge, and it hardened so when I tried to wipe it up, it wasn't coming out no matter how hard I scrubbed. So I have to steam clean the fridge in order to get rid of it."

Now, I could have come along and said, "Why don't you hang a little air freshener up in there? Just kind of cover up the stench. You know you're just going to have a worse problem on your hands on down the road."

In the exact same way, that's what religion is. Religion is covering up the stench of our sin without a change of heart. And God created us to be righteous, meaning not that we would cover up our sin with religious behavior, but that we would allow God to get in there and do a heart transformation.

See, we wouldn't need the law to do what is right, we would want to. I don't need a law to do the things that I love. You never have to command me to eat chocolate lava cake or take a nap or kiss my wife. No law required about any of those things because I just naturally want to do them. I love them. The law is only required when my corrupted heart begins to drift away from the righteousness of God. So listen:

Sin is not really an action as much as it's a condition.

Sin is not a list of the bad things that we do. In fact, for you a certain action might be a sin and for another Christ follower it's not. That's when it gets really confusing. It's what Paul calls matters of conscience in his letter to the Corinthians. Let me just give you one random example: alcohol.

The Bible does not prohibit alcohol. What does it prohibit? Drunkenness. Why? Because you do stupid stuff when you are drunk, and you are leaning in on that as an addiction and you're being filled with that instead of the Holy Spirit. That's why it says that. But the Bible doesn't say that you can't enjoy a glass of Cab or a nice bourbon. Can I get a good amen?

But, depending upon who the person is.... And that's what Paul says, "Hey, for some of us we lay down our freedoms to do that because of our brother or sister who has a problem with it, it is a sin for them to even have one drink.

So sin is not an action, it is a condition. Therefore the sinful things we do are a result of the corrupted hearts we possess and no amount of remorse, regret, or a payment on our part will ever get rid of the stench, even on my best day. Sounds pretty stinking hopeless, doesn't it?

Thank goodness for the next 10 verses. Verses 21 to 31, in my opinion, are the greatest set of sentences in the whole Bible. Martin Luther called them the greatest paragraph in the Scriptures. Tim Keller said, "This is the biggest transition in all of the Bible." And in a sentence, it is basically this: God can change us by becoming for us what we could never be on our own and doing for us what we could never do.

The little subtitle in my Bible right above this section says this: "Christ Took Our Punishment." And I'm so thankful He did. I just want to read these verses and I want you to notice how many times it says these words *made right*. It says in verse 21—one of the greatest butts in the Bible:

*"But now God has shown us a way to be made right with him without keeping the requirements of the law..." that is such good news, "... as was promised in the writings of Moses and the prophets long ago. We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are.*

*"For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood.*

*"This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when he held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past, for he was looking ahead and including them in what he would do in this present time."*

*Now what he just said there is a big obstacle for a lot of people, and they will say things like, "Well what about all of the people before Jesus died on a cross? What about all of the people in the Old Testament who didn't have the sacrifice of Jesus? Did God send them to hell?" And this right here says, "No, He didn't." Jesus paid, retroactively, for their sin. That's how sovereign and good He is.*

*"God did this to demonstrate his righteousness..." which means He will always do what is right, "... for he himself is fair and just, and he makes sinners right in his sight when they believe in Jesus."*

Oh man, those sentences are so good. And the word here for being made right in theological terms is:

Justification

And the way that I learned this growing up is this: just as if I had never sinned. See, if sin is the legal standing that I had before then He justifies us freely—meaning you don't have to pay it off, no purgatory—He justifies us freely by His grace—meaning He declares you righteous through the finished work of Jesus on a cross. It is a pronouncement not a process. It is enacted when you place your trust in Jesus. And the prerequisite is simply the realization and recognition of your sinful condition instead of a denial or a normalizing of it. So verse 16:

*"... the day is coming when God, through Christ Jesus..." I'm going back to chapter 2 now, "... will judge everyone's secret life."*

That is one of the most terrifying sentences in Romans. What it means is that each one of us will one day stand before the judgment seat of God, both Christians and non-Christians, both religious and non-religious. We're all going to stand before the judgment seat of God. And the sobering reality is that we will all face the stench of our sinfulness, and everything will be exposed. Not just our bad behavior but our corrupted motives, even behind good behavior. And we don't like that. I don't like that.

In fact, we hate that. We hate the idea of God as judge. And you want to know why? It's because what you've been told and what I've been told throughout our entire life, we've been conditioned to feel this way: when you sin and mess up, I become a judge; when I sin and mess up, I become a defense attorney. So you sin and mess up, I'm like, "Man, how could you? I always knew there was something up with you." I sin, "Well, you don't understand. There is an explanation. If you only knew."

This is the most evident when you pull up behind somebody at a red stop light and the light turns green and he doesn't go. I immediately become a judge. I immediately assume the worst. It's like, "Man, he must be on his phone. He must not know how to drive. He is going to make me late. Selfish moron."

But if I'm at a red light and it turns green and I don't go and the guy behind me starts to judge me by honking his horn, I immediately become a defense attorney, "You don't understand. I've got this important text I'm trying to send. Relax, Mario Andretti. We're all going to get there at the same time."

Because when you sin, I become a judge and when I sin, I become a defense attorney.

This is why we hate the idea that we might be judged by God and found guilty. And do you know why this is? Because for the most part, if not all of your life, you've been told—aka, your internal compass has been calibrated to this: it doesn't really matter what you believe just as long as you sincerely believe it. You're not as good as some. You're not as bad as most. God grades on a curve. I think you're good. Follow the desires of your heart. You just do you. Here's a participation trophy. And we are unaware of our sinfulness before a holy God.

One of the clearest evidences of this is the most common question that people throw at me as a pastor for their unbelief in God. And it simply goes like this, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" So many assumptions made in that statement. It's basically saying, "Well, you know what? I just can't get past the fact that if a bad thing happens to a good person, then God must be unjust, unaware, or unworthy of my affection and devotion." And we are assuming that we are good.

The theologian R. C. Sproul one time was asked this exact same question, "R. C., why do bad things happen to good people?" And he sat back, took off his glasses, and he thought about it for a minute and said, "In all of human history that's only happened once, and He volunteered."

See, the cross was a demonstration of two primary things. We hated God enough to take His life and God loved us enough to lay it down. And God is so just that payment for sin needed to be made, but He is also so loving that He knew we could never make the payment, so He paid it Himself. And we are not mistake makers in need of a life coach. We are sinners in need of a Savior and that is a stark difference. So, what happens is when you give your life to Jesus, is the most fair, unfair trade ever. You give Jesus your sin and He gives you, His righteousness.

When Lindsay and I were dating this was the car that I drove. She married me for my wheels. I drove a Honda Civic and it wasn't the cool one that they had all tripped out in the first *Fast and Furious* movie. This is what I had. And Lindsay's dad had gone to a car auction, and he had bought a couple of Chrysler LHSs. I don't know if you remember these cars, but he gave one to her mom and one to her. So this is the car that Lindsay drove when we were dating.

And these are the cars we drove when we got married. And a great trade happened. What was mine became hers, the Honda Civic, what was hers became mine, the Chrysler LHS. And any chance I could use it I was like, "Hey, honey, I need a little extra space, can I borrow your car?" So she got the raw end of that deal.

And so did Jesus.

See there is this great trade that happens when you give your life to Christ. Everything that was yours, the stench of your sin, He took on the cross and He paid for it and then He gave you His righteousness. So now when God looks at you, He sees a spotless, righteous saint. That's who you are.

And I just want you to know that it doesn't matter what you've done or where you've been. This is open to you. See, here's the message of the Gospel. You are so bad that Jesus had to die for you, but you are so loved by God, He was glad to die for you.

And there are two deals on the table. You can try to pay off the penalty of your own badness and sin and you'll never do it. Now you might manage to do a little bit but eventually it will just lead to spiritual pride, or it will lead to spiritual depression because you realize you just can't do it. Or you can come empty handed to Jesus and just let Him pay the penalty for your sins and let Him regenerate your heart and give you brand new motivations inside. You keep recalibrating your compass back to Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit and His Word.

In Hebrews, chapter 9, it says, "Every single one of us are destined to die once." So unfortunately, no reincarnation. "We die once, and we face judgment." What that means is that if you're not dead, God's not done. What that means is that if you still have breath in your lungs right now, there is still hope and the Spirit of God is beckoning you and calling you and saying, "Hey, listen.



Even on your best day you don't even come close. So stop striving and just start dying. Die to you and give your life to Me. Surrender to Me." It's the best trade ever.

So today, what I want to do is I just want to pray, and I know that maybe some of you are like you don't know what to pray. So let me just be your guide through that prayer. And I simply want to ask you to bow your head and close your eyes. Closing your eyes and bowing your head has nothing to do with it. It's not that God hears your prayers when that happens, it's just helps you focus. And I simply want to pray over you, and I just want you to make this prayer your own today, regardless of whether you are church-ed or unchurch-ed, Christian or non-Christian.

Father, we come to You today and we are so grateful for the Gospel message that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone through Christ alone. And this is not a work that we might boast in it or be depressed by it when we can't fulfill it, but we rest completely on Jesus.

So, God, I'm sorry for rejecting You. I'm sorry for blaming You. I'm sorry for trying to reshape You and Your Word to fit the life that I want to live. And I really do want to follow after Jesus in every area of my life, not to just receive Him as Savior, but to follow Him as Lord.

God, forgive me. Maybe the last 18 months have not been my finer moments as a human being where I just mirrored the division and the anger and the confusion and the fear that is found in the rest of the world. Forgive me when I've tried to politicize my faith and I've tried to make You a poster boy for my political convictions instead of being a citizen of heaven.

Forgive me, God, for the friendly fire that I've fired at other Christians within the body of Christ because, honestly, I was hurting and hurting people hurt people and I just wanted somebody else to hurt with me.

Father, forgive me where I've made this about other issues rather than keeping my eyes on You. Forgive me for making religion my idol when all along I should have been keeping my eyes on You.

So today is a line in the sand. No more. Today, right now, we're not going to allow external circumstances of this world, we're not going to allow CNN or Fox News to taint the way that we see this world anymore. We're going to listen to the voice of Jesus and we're going to follow You as exiles because our citizenship is in heaven. And we are not going to exchange the real thing for a cheap substitute. We're going to hold on to the real thing.

So, God, today I just give You my life and I'm super scared because I don't have all of the answers and I've got so many questions, but I trust You right now and I trust that Your Spirit will help answer my questions as I walk with You.

God, I come to You today as a church-going Christian, recommitting myself to You because I've drifted, and I want to come back. Thank You for Your grace. In Jesus' name. And in unity we say: Amen.

