COVENANT PULPIT

A loving family, dependent on the Holy Spirit, committed to the Word, growing in grace, reaching out in mercy... the TIES THAT BIND

ROMANS TWO

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Ivan told me a story that's haunted me ever since I first heard it twenty-five years ago. Maybe it will get inside your skin too.

The bearded, ragged man appeared on the streets of Seville during the horror spawned by the Spanish Inquisition. It was bad enough that he championed ideals deemed heretical by the Church. But this stranger also poked fun at the stupidities of organized religion and mocked its pompous bishops.

After he performed miracles that attracted huge crowds, he went from being a public nuisance to posing a clear and present danger to the Church. When people emptied the cathedrals to follow him, something had to be done to stop the hemorrhaging.

He was arrested by order of the Inquisition, dragged to their underground chambers and tortured. He refused to recant his heresies. He was brought before a church tribunal. They mocked him, slapped his face, and spit at him. But he remained silent. So they condemned him to be burned at the stake in the public square the next day.

This barbaric cruelty offended their religious sensibilities, but the burning of a heretic is sometimes necessary to keep the sheep in line.

Yet the stranger haunted the Grand Inquisitor. So he secretly went to the jail at midnight. As he peered at the condemned man through the bars, he shuddered to realize that the prisoner was Jesus. It would have been bad enough if he had just been some fly-by-night troublemaker, but the real Jesus is more dangerous to the Church than a thousand heretics. So the Inquisitor tried to talk some sense into him.

"Your problem, Jesus is that you never knew how to build the kind of religion that keeps folks in line. Remember when Satan tempted you in the wilderness. Had you listened to him, you could have created a bigger, more powerful church." The Inquisitor was now pontificating with the smugness of a schoolmaster lecturing the class dunce:

"Why did you reject Satan's temptations? You should have turned the stones to bread. People always follow those who feed their bellies. Why didn't you jump off the temple spire and let the angels catch you? People need a good magic act to convince them of the supernatural. You could have bowed down to Satan so that he would have given you the kingdoms of this earth. If the Medieval Church has learned anything, when the Christian religion gets control of the government it can impose its will on everyone."

His Eminence paused, waiting for answers. There was only awful silence. The prisoner looked into his eyes with a penetrating sadness that stabbed at the old man's soul. Recovering quickly he replied, "It doesn't matter, Jesus. The Church has come a long way since its humble beginnings. We really don't need you anymore."

Then it occurred to the good Reverend that a public execution might stir up the passion of the watching church folk. And fired up believers always disrupt well-oiled church operations. So he ordered Jesus to be released. His guards led him to the outskirts of Seville, and told him never to return again.
Jesus silently kissed the Grand Inquisitor on his cold lips, and then disappeared into the darkness. The Inquisitor felt a strange warmth in his heart. But he quickly put it out of his mind, went back to his palace and climbed into his soft bed.

I often think about Ivan’s story. I heard it 25 years ago when I read Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. In the book, Ivan tells this parable which I have retold in my own words. Ivan concludes, “In reality, the Grand Inquisitor was an atheist.” Shaking his head, Ivan is sure of one thing:

“Some of the most religious people in the world are atheists at heart. They build great temples and exhaust themselves promoting gods they really don’t believe in.”

Ivan reminds me of why I hate religion. It is a parasite that attaches itself to real faith and sucks the life out of it. Martin Luther wrote, “Wherever God erects a cathedral, the devil builds a chapel.” No one makes a more deadly use of religion than Satan. John Calvin said, “Jesus gave the true church the keys to heaven and hell. Unfortunately, the false church has used those keys to throw wide open the doorway to hell and shut up the gates of heaven.” After a lifetime of observing it, Mark Twain cynically observed, “Religion is about as useful as throwing both ends of a rope to a drowning man.”

The word religion comes from the Latin religio, which means “to bind up” or “tie up.” The word was used in ancient times to describe binding up prisoners. Religion enslaves people to superstition and ignorance while it binds them to rules, regulations, and traditions.

On November 18, 1978, 909 men, women and children in Jonestown, Guyana drank poisoned Kool-Aid in a mass suicide. They did it out of blind obedience to their religious leader, the Reverend Jim Jones. It matters little what Kool-Aid you drink—whether it comes in the flavor of Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Methodist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, or Baptist. It will all kill you in the end. St. Paul understood this. That’s why, in the second chapter of Romans, he takes on organized religion. This is the provocative principle he gives us:

Religion perpetuates the Divide
by perverting reality and preventing relationships.

Remember, Romans is a missionary appeal letter. St. Paul has wants to take the gospel to Spain. The whole point of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans is to give Christians (both then and now), a sense of urgency. He wants us to grasp the divide between God and humans. This divide has spawned all the divisions between people in this world. We are so desperate for healing.

Paul was an ultra-orthodox Jew before he embraced Christ. When it came to religion, you could divide the Roman world into two groups: pagans and Jews. Jews believed in One God; pagans believed in many. Jews worshipped the Creator; pagans bowed down to images of created
things. Jews believed in one way to God; pagans believed in many. Jews were people of the Bible; pagans were not. Jews were children of God; pagans were lost. But mostly, Jews worked hard to keep the Law of God; pagans broke it in the most creatively depraved ways.

Then a new belief arose out of Judaism: that a Jew named Jesus was the fulfillment of Jewish prophecies about the Messiah. More than that, he was God in the flesh who died for our sins. For its first 30 years, Christianity was a sect of Judaism. Then Paul got a divine call to take the gospel to the pagans. That’s why he says in Romans 1:18, “I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.”

In chapter one, he nails the pagans of the 1st Century. The pagans worshiped idols in the shape of created beings instead of the one true Creator. Therefore God poured out his wrath by giving them over to all kinds of depravities. Twenty-seven are listed in graphic detail in chapter one. Had orthodox Jews (or pious Presbyterians) heard Paul, they may have shouted, “Preach it brother Paul! Give it to those disgustingly dirty pagans!” But now he turns on the religious Jews in chapter two. You can hear a pin drop in the synagogue (or local Bible Church) when he says in Romans 2:1,

“You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.

Though Paul is talking to religious, synagogue-attending Jews in the First Century, he might as well be talking to religious, church-going Christians in our day. He wants us to know that religious, Bible-toting, church folk can be as far from God as the sinners down at the saloon. In fact, they are in a worse place because they can deceive themselves through their religiosity. And their piety and pride has put up walls of religiosity that keep them from healthy relationships with those outside the church. He gives us four ways that a religious spirit kills true faith:

1. RELIGIOSITY SPAWNS SMUGNESS.

Catch the first charge he levels at religious Jews then, and religious Christians now, in verse one and repeated in various ways in the first 4 verses: “…you judge the other…” What’s at the root of a judgmental spirit? Spiritual pride! Before I can analyze what’s wrong with you, I have to figure that everything is right with me—at least in the area where I am critiquing you.

This is where religions do their greatest damage. I define religion as man’s attempt to solve his problem with God and himself. And what is that problem? We are messed up, and so is our world. So we try to fix what is broken in us and in our world. St. Paul states the problem in Romans 3:23: “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

What is the glory of God? He is absolutely perfect. What does God demand of us? In two words: absolute perfection. God gives only one
commandment in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were absolutely free to do anything they wanted, except for the one thing. They couldn’t eat a single bite of the fruit of the one tree. Imagine, only one rule! But it had to be followed perfectly: one bite, and death would come to everyone.

The thing that you are suppose to ignore is impossible to put out of your mind. The thing that you can’t have is the thing you are driven to take. Forbidden fruit always tastes best. Within the first day, Adam and Eve took the fateful bite. They only messed up once. But one time was one too many. God demands absolute perfection. Do you know why we are driven to be perfectionists? Do you know why we strive to do better, drive ourselves to go farther, and push ourselves to soar higher? Have you ever wondered why most of us are never satisfied? We have been created in the image of a God who is absolutely perfect. But we aren’t. And it drives some of us crazy to fix everything.

What then is religion? It is man’s attempt to make the impossible possible. Religion puts together a bunch of rules, regulations, and rituals and then challenges people to do them. If they manage to keep the rules (or at least fool themselves that they have) then they can work their way up the ladder to heaven or create heaven on earth. But there are two problems with religions: they always lower the bar. One way is by putting together a list of dos and don’ts that are attainable. Every religious group has its own list of forbidden fruits and golden rules. Jesus often complained that the religious Jews of his day focused on keeping the easy rules that didn’t matter, and neglecting the tough stuff that was important to God. It’s easy to go to church every Sunday. It’s not so easy to take care of orphans and widows, or to love your lazy brother-in-law, or forgive the spouse who has wounded you.

The second way that religion lowers the bar is by grading on the curve. God says that to pass, you have to score a 100%. Religion says that you just have to do better than other folks. How can you feel better about your performance? It won’t be by comparing yourself to God. His glory is in his perfection. You will fall short of his glory. So you measure yourself by others. “I might be bad, but I’m better than Sally.” “I know I mess up, but John really messes up.” How does the Jew of Paul’s day feel good about his performance? He looks at the lifestyle of the Gentile. He not only judges the pagan as bad, but he sees himself as pretty darn good. Presbyterians, Baptists, and every other kind of religious folk do the same thing today. It makes us feel so smug.

The first sign of the spirit of religiosity is a critical attitude, a judgmental heart, and focuses on the sins of others instead of focusing on your own heart. God doesn’t grade on the curve. Therefore, it doesn’t matter how well you do in comparison to others. Biblical Christianity is not religion. It has to do with relationships, and forces us to face reality: God is perfect and he demands perfection. Look at verse three: “So when you, a mere man pass judgment on them, do you think you will escape God’s judgment?” If we judge ourselves by God’s perfection, we are
doomed. Religiosity judges others and condemns them with smug pride. It's a stench in God's nostrils, and it makes us pretty stinky to those outside the church too.

In the Beatitudes of Matthew Five, Jesus tells us how we get into and stay in the Kingdom of God. “Blessed are the poor in Spirit…” We must look at God’s perfection and see the utter bankruptcy of our own spirit. “Blessed are those who mourn.” We must weep over our condition. “Blessed are the meek.” We must come to the point where we see ourselves as less than everyone else, even as “the chief of sinners.” “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled.” We must come to the point where we crave a righteousness that has to come from somewhere else. In Romans 1:17, Paul defines the gospel as revealing “a righteousness from God.” Jesus alone was perfectly right. God's kindness offers his righteousness to us. Sometimes we fall into the trap of the religious described by Paul in Romans 2:4: “…not realizing that God's kindness leads to repentance.” It’s by repentance and faith that we receive Christ's righteous perfection. Then God sees us as absolutely perfect.

A true relationship with God wipes away all spiritual smugness. You will never again want to judge others, because you will be so aware of how far you fall short of his glory. You will know that, if it weren't for the perfect righteousness of Jesus given to you by faith, you would be at the same place they are. And you will be as desperate as St. Paul to bring the gospel to them—not out of arrogance, but as one beggar sharing a handout from heaven with another beggar.

2. RELIGIOSITY BREEDS COMPLACENCY.

I remember a college class graded on the curve. The top score on the final test was 28%. Imagine, getting an A when you got less than a third of the questions right. I only scored 22% and got a B+. None of us A and B students should have let those scores deceive us into thinking we were great students. Yet religious folks feel complacent because they look good up against the pagans on the sliding curve.

Look at what Paul says in verse five: “But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.” Remember what Paul says about the pagans in Romans 1:18? “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven…” He then goes on to describe the horrible sins, abuses, and diseases, that nonbelievers suffer right now because of their refusal to worship the one true God.

But the religious Jews are spared that wrath in this life. So are religious Christians and Muslims. All three religions believe in one God. They follow the Ten Commandments. They believe in living good, clean, moral lives. They believe in monogamy, marriage, and all the virtues that come living the virtues of their Holy Books. As a result, they are spared so much of the present wrath that comes from so many of depravities of modern
When John Wesley began to preach the gospel in 18th Century England and Colonial America, less than 10 percent of the people went to church. There was widespread immorality, ignorance, and unspeakable poverty. Wesley often spoke of the greatest danger of a spiritual awakening. People would come to Christ because of their desperate lives. But, once they began to follow the principles of the Bible, their marriages would be stronger, and their families stronger. They would clean up their lives, stop gambling and drinking, work hard, save money, and make a better life for themselves. After a while they would prosper, and then become complacent. They might even become prideful. Having lost the poverty of spirit, and becoming comfortable in their success, they would no longer feel a need for Jesus or a fear of God. They might even forget what Paul says in verse six: “God will give to each person according to what he has done.”

There is no favoritism with God. He judges on a standard of perfection. If religious folks live such moral lives that they escape the consequences of immoral living on this earth, verse five warns that there is still a “wrath stored up” and waiting on judgment day. One may live in a beautiful home, have well-adjusted kids, and enjoy the fruits of honest living. That same person can shake his or her head at the sight of a homeless drug addict, or an AIDS infected gay person, or the shattered career of an embezzler. But it should not give the religious person a false sense of complacency that ignores the reality of sin. Nor should it cause that person to shrink back from the immoral person as if he were better because of his religiosity. Instead, the religious person should fear God, and cling desperately to the work of his Son on the Cross as the only escape from the wrath yet to come. Only then, will that religious person feel as sense of solidarity with the pagan and reach out to his or her fellow sinner with compassion and humility of heart.

3. RELIGIOSITY BREEDS HYPOCRISY.

Paul goes on in verses 17-29 to speak of the pride of the religious Jew. He could just as well be speaking of the pride of the Presbyterian or Baptist or Pentecostal. He lists that pride with graphic phrases. Verse 17—“...you rely on the Law...” Verse 18—“...you know his will and approve of what is superior...” Verse 19—“...you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind; a light for those in the dark...” Verse 20—“...an instructor of the foolish...” He then goes on to speak of the ways these religious folk brag about how they keep the law. But he shows how they violate the very laws they pretend to keep.

I will only focus on one of his examples in verse 22: “...you abhor idols; do you rob temples?” The Jews believed in One God. They hated idolatry, as do Christians. But the Jews were infamous in the pagan world for sneaking into pagan temples after dark and stealing gold and silver idols and other sacred items, melting them down, and keeping the
precious metals. The rabbis even said that they were doing a sacred duty by ridding the world of idols. In short, they could steal from the pagans and feel religious at the same time. The Crusaders could kill Muslim women and children and feel like they were ridding the world of infidels. Modern Christians can hold back on the money that belongs to God and argue that they are protecting their family’s financial future. We can condemn pagan for aborting their children for convenience sake, and then limit the number of children we have for convenience sake. We can shake our heads at people who bail out of their marriages when their needs aren’t met, and then bail out of our marriages when the going gets tough.

Religion, by grading on the curve produces judgmental pride that always leads to hypocrisy. The word comes from the Greek word: hypokritus. The word literally means, “covered with wax.” In ancient times, a statue maker might discover that there were cracks or flaws in the marble. So a dishonest merchant would fill the cracks and flaws with melted wax to hid them. In the same way, religious people often hide their sins through rationalizations, masquerades, excuses, and god talk. But Jesus said in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the pure in Spirit…” That word pure literally means open, transparent, and real. True Christians don’t have to fake it. We can admit that we are sinners saved by grace and even let our flaws show, because God loves us anyway. We are then free to love others in spite of their flaws.

4. RELIGIOSITY CAN ONLY WHITEWASH TOMBS

Only Christ can raise the dead. Religion can only whitewash the grave markers. Jesus loved to call the religious leaders of his day, “Whitewashed tombs full of dead man’s bones.” St. Paul ends by talking about circumcision as an example of all the outward rituals of Judaism. He ends by saying in verse 28, “A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly.” Religion can only clean up the outside. It has no power to change a person. Even the devil can keep all the rules and rituals of religion. He knows more theology than you do. He can appear as an angel of light. The Grand Inquisitor probably had a fine Christian funeral with a stirring eulogy about his great faith. But he went down to hell as an unredeemed priest. Our job as Christians isn’t to clean up people’s morals. Our job is to introduce them to Christ, and then let him decide what he’s going to clean up when he takes up residence in their lives. Religion is powerless. Only Christ raises the dead. Nothing less than Christ is ever good enough to transform us.

This is why St. Paul has an urgency to share his gospel. Only it has the explosive power of dynamite to rearrange life. If we only want religion, like the Grand Inquisitor we will lead Jesus to the outskirts of our life and out the back door of our church, telling him never to return again. But, if we are serious about being “a loving family, dependant on the Holy Spirit, committed to the Word, growing in grace, reaching out in mercy” to transform a world—we will invite him in and take him out there to change everything by his gospel.

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