

# Causes of Spiritual Blindness

Romans 2:17-29

LTS: Matt. 23:16-23

“The god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4).

One of the many benefits of living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the “miracle” of modern medical science. Before the discovery of antibiotics, for example, infant blindness was a huge problem in the world. Today however, most newborns are routinely given antibiotic eye drops to prevent the possibility of blindness.

For older men and women, blindness has several possible origins. For example, it is relatively common for older people to develop Cataracts: Cataracts occur when the lens of the eye becomes clouded. When this happens the light that comes through the pupil is blurred and one’s vision becomes muddled and dim. People who have cataracts say it’s like looking through the dirty windshield of a car. But in our day, cataracts can usually be removed by a relatively simple surgical procedure that can restore one’s sight.

If you have read the Bible, you know that blindness is mentioned many times in both Testaments. Usually, it speaks of the same unfortunate physical condition that medical science attempts to prevent or cure. On the other hand, however, sometimes the term “blindness” is used as a metaphor for a spiritual problem that keeps people from seeing their own sin and need for the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ.

For example, when Paul wrote his 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the church in Corinth, he warned that “The god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4).

This morning, as we continue our study in the book of Romans, we find Paul addressing such spiritual blindness among his Jewish brethren. Like all sin in the heart of man, people are spiritually blind by birth and by choice. What’s worse, we are blind to their own blindness. We think we can see just fine, thank you very much. We believe our own understanding of what it means to have a relationship with God is sound and clear when in point of fact it is anything but.

The “god of this world” has inflicted mankind with what could be described as spiritual Cataracts that make it impossible for us to see clearly the things that would otherwise lead to salvation. Paul, however, because of his love for his Jewish brethren, is determined to perform the delicate surgery necessary to give them spiritual sight. This is what we are witnessing together when we read Romans 2:17-29.

So, if you have your Bible with you, please turn with me to...

Read Rom. 2:17-29

But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God <sup>18</sup> and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; <sup>19</sup> and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, <sup>20</sup> an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, <sup>21</sup> you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? <sup>22</sup> You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? <sup>23</sup> You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. <sup>24</sup> For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” <sup>25</sup> For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. <sup>26</sup> So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? <sup>27</sup> Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. <sup>28</sup> For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. <sup>29</sup> But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is NOT from man but from God.

May the Lord add His blessing to  
the reading of His word.

In the text before us this morning, Paul points to three causes of spiritual blindness that prevents his Jewish brethren from seeing “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.” Paul desperately wants them to see it and be saved. He wants them to discover the Righteousness of Christ that has the power to justify them by faith. Paul is so concerned for their salvation that he will declare later in this letter (9:2–3)

I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. <sup>3</sup> For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.

Paul knows, however, that his death would be insufficient for their salvation. What they really need is to embrace the fact that despite all their spiritual privileges and advantages, they are sinners all – and deserving of God’s judgment same as the Gentiles. Only then will the scales fall from their eyes so they can see the glory of Jesus - their true Messiah and Savior.

We know this is what Paul is attempting to achieve in this part of the letter because of a few statements he has made. For example:

- 2:3 “[speaking to Jews]...do you suppose O man - you who judge those who practice such

things and yet do them yourself - that you will escape the judgment of God?

- 3:5. “But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us?:
- 3:9 “What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin... “
- 3:22-23. “For there is no distinction [I take that to mean between Jews and Gentiles] <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

So, you see, because Paul loves his Jewish brethren, he is doing the difficult and dangerous work of exposing their blindness to their sin and the wrath of God that is being revealed NOT only upon pagan Gentiles, but upon God’s Chosen people – Israel. But what is the cause of such spiritual blindness? Why is it so difficult for them to accept the fact that God is NOT going to welcome them into heaven simply because are Jews? Why is it so hard for them to grasp the fear of the Lord because of his impending and eternal judgment on Their sin Why are they blind to the revelation of God’s impending Judgement and its cure?

Well, first, the Jews are...

## Blinded by Heavenly Privileges:

1. In vv. 17-21 Paul mentions 7 privileges and practices that tended to blind the Jews to their need. The first privilege was related to their name. Paul says (17) , “If you call yourself a Jew.” That is, if you consider yourself one of God’s chosen People – a Jew.

- A. Originally, they were called Hebrews after the language they spoke. You will remember that when they entered the Promised Land, God gave portions of land to each of the 12 tribes of Israel. After the death of King Solomon, the kingdom divided into two separate kingdoms. Ten tribes made up the northern kingdom which was called Israel. The southern kingdom was made up of two tribes and it was called Judah after the son of Jacob who bore that name.
- B. Judah was the tribe from which the Israel’s Kings were to descend. It is the place where God’s visible presence (the Shakina Glory) first in the tabernacle and then in Solomon’s temple. It was the place where the priest represented men before God and God before men. It was the place of the sacrifices and offerings prescribed by the Law of God. It was the designated location for the three major feasts every male Israelite was required to attend. But most importantly, it was the place from which the Messiah will reign.
- C. Even modern Israelites are proud of the name “Jew.” The name itself comes from the root that means Praise.” If we glance briefly at v. 29, we discover a play on words. Paul writes (29) “but a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the spirit,

not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.”<sup>1</sup>

D. It is as if Paul is saying, “You love being called a Jew because God says you are “praised.” But if you do not repent from the heart and believe in His Crucified and risen Son, you will be judged and condemned by God. Jews tend to be blinded by their name.

2. Second (and briefly) they (17) “Relied on the Law.” That is, they trusted in the law of God given by Moses. No other nation had been given God’s law. Nothing was more important to the Jews than God’s law. In fact, the word “Law” is used 10 times in these verses before us this morning.

3. Third, they boasted in God. The word “Boast” means to Brag. They were proud of their unique, covenant relationship with God.

4. Fourth (v. 18), they know God’s will. How do they know the will of God? They know God’s will through his Law (His written word).

5. Fifth: They approve what is excellent. The word for “excellent” here means essential or valuable. In other words, they were able to determine the value of things. The word of God gave them discernment (just as the book of Proverbs promises).

6. Sixth: they were instructed by the law. Even from the earliest years of a Jewish boy’s life, he was taught the Law of God.

7. Seventh: Paul says (19) “And if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness...”

A. The nation of Israel (Isa. 42:6) was to be a light for the nations. The Jews were serious about biblical education. They were taught to read and write so they could read God’s law and instruct the world in the ways of God. They considered themselves guides to the blind. But quite frankly, they didn’t care about the nations. Witness the story of Jonah! They were content to let the peoples of the Gentiles remain in spiritual darkness. On the other hand, they were devoted to the education of their own people in the law of God.

B. Paul says (20), they gave instruction to the uneducated and children who needed to learn the basics of God’s instructions for life.

C. In fact, the word for “being instructed” is *Katecheo* from which we get our English word, *Catechism*.

D. It had the general meaning of oral instruction of any sort, but was especially associated with teaching by repetition. Both at home and in the synagogues.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S. Lewis Johnson, Romans 1:17-29, *Rite verses. Righteousness*, Audio Sermon and Manuscript audio on the SLJ Institute Website. Last visited June 16, 2021. <https://sljinstitute.net/category/pauls-epistles/romans/>

<sup>2</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Romans*, vol. 1, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 153.

8. Now friends, we need to pay attention to these things 7 Privileges and practices because All of them have been ours as Christian believers. As long as there has been a church, there has been spiritual blindness in the midst of spiritual privilege and practice. Like the Jews in Paul's day...

- A. We love to identify ourselves NOT as Jews, but as Christians
- B. We claim to rely upon or place our trust in the word of God.
- C. We boast in God. As Paul said, (Gal. 6:14) "Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,"
- D. We Know God's will because he has told us in his word.
- E. We approve things that are [morally] excellent.
- F. We have been (and continue to be) instructed in God's word. We provide our children with Christian education.
- G. When we talk to new believers, we instruct them in the basics of biblical wisdom.
- H. When we speak with unbelievers, introducing them to the gospel, we serve as guides to the blind.
- I. Not only that, but we make the astounding claim that we possess the embodiment of truth for all people.

9. Nevertheless, my dear friends, none of these things have ever saved a single sinner from the wrath of God. It is entirely possible to have been blessed with all of these spiritual privileges and practices as part of the very fabric of our life, and yet STILL remain under the righteous wrath of God.

10. In the end, we will not be judged by our privileges or professions. Paul says, on Judgment Day, each person will be judged by their works. That is, we will be judged according to the fruit that is born from our lives. If you are a true child of God by grace through faith, the evidence will be obvious in how you live – what your priorities were, how you related to God's word, God's church, God's rule in your life. Did you love Jesus from the heart? Do you seek to bring others into a saving relationship with Jesus our Living Hope. The fruit of your life will bear witness to the root of your life. So beware! You may be blind to your own blindness. The fact that you call yourself a Christian may be the very thing that blinds you to your need and Christ's atoning supply.

11. So, Paul's first concern is that His Jewish brethren may be blinded by their privileges. Second. They are...

## II. Blinded by Hidden Hypocrisy:

Read v. 21-24

You then who teach others, do you NOT teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? <sup>22</sup> You who say that one must NOT commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob

temples? <sup>23</sup> You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.  
<sup>24</sup> For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the  
Gentiles because of you.”

1. Notice from the beginning whom He is speaking to. The first word is YOU! O my friend, at the end of the day it matters NOT whether you have grown up in church. It doesn't matter that you have been a deacon or even an elder.

- A. Paul is speaking to you!
- B. Paul is anxious for YOU to repent and believe.
- C. He's calling you to humble yourself and confess your need! Who cares what anyone else may think or say after all these years of pretending! Now is the time! Today is the day of salvation!

2. To the Jews, Paul's questions is: “Do you believe God will count you as righteous because of your Jewishness? Then he offers a sample list of three sins that leading Jewish people have committed; namely, Theft, Adultery, and robing pagan temples for their precious metals. All three of these are forbidden by the law of God. The first two are clearly in the Ten Commandments: “You shall not steal,” and “You shall not commit adultery.” The Third is mentioned in Deut. 7:25 where Moses says,

The carved images of their gods you shall burn with fire. You shall not covet the silver or the gold that is on them or take it for yourselves, lest you be ensnared by it, for it is an abomination to the LORD your God.

3. Paul is NOT saying that every Jewish person has committed these clear breaches of the law. But if you think that your righteous standing before God is by virtue of your Jewishness, you're in serious trouble, because there is a long history of Jewish unrighteousness – even among its leaders (cf. Judah & Tamar). There is NO inherent righteousness in one's Jewishness. To say otherwise is to reveal one's spiritual blindness. And it is hypocrisy because they commit the very sins that they condemn the Gentiles for.

4. In Jesus' ministry, he made the accusation even more pointed and personal when he declared...

(Matt. 23:13-15)

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. <sup>15</sup> Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much

a child of hell as yourselves...<sup>23</sup> “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.<sup>24</sup> You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!<sup>25</sup> “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.<sup>26</sup> You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

5. You may say, “But Pastor, I’ve been a pretty good person? Really? Well, let’s put that to the test!

- A. The law of God says you must not steal. Have you ever taken anything that doesn’t belong to you? Of course you have. And what do you call a person who takes what is not his? A thief. (Illustration of Pastors taking too many free books at Shepherd’s Conference.)
- B. Have you ever Committed adultery? You may say, Of course not. But Jesus says that if a man looks at a woman with lust in his heart he has committed Adultery with her already in his heart.
- C. Have you ever lied? Of course you have! Everyone has. And what do you call a person who lies? A Liar.
- D. Have you ever committed murder? You may say, Of course not! But Jesus says, If a man is sinfully angry at his neighbor, he murders him in his heart.
- E. So, let’s tally up the score! So far you are a liar, a thief, an adulterer, and a murderer at heart. If God is a righteous Judge and you stand before him on Judgment Day, do you think he will find you innocent or guilty?
- F. And these are just 4 of the 10 Commandments!

6. Notice how Paul concludes this (23-24),

You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.<sup>24</sup> For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” That is, they see your hypocrisy.

7. This is a powerful indictment, because Paul’s condemnation of their hypocrisy here is actually a quotation from Isaiah 52 which was written hundreds of years earlier. You see, the Jews never did possess their own righteousness. 8. Any claim to being righteous in the eyes of God was

blatant hypocrisy. The term Hypocrisy is not used in this text, but it is Paul's primary concern. Israel had become a nation of spiritual hypocrites and they were absolutely blind to it.

- A. Its helpful to note here that the word for Hypocrisy comes from the GK *Hipocritos* meaning "one who wears a mask.
- B. That is, he pretends to be something that he is not. The law of God is supposed to be a spiritual mirror. When you look at it, your failures sins are magnified and brought into clear focus. But sinners tend to shatter the mirror and throw it away in favor of their own evaluation of their own righteousness. Instead of looking into the Mirror of God's Law they put on the mask of hypocrisy. Greek Theater were called Hypocritoi.

8. Once again, Paul's message is that if you think your Jewishness is proof of your righteousness in the eyes of God, you are fearfully mistaken.

9. They (and we) have always been sinners. And that is exactly Paul's point. Human beings have always had the problem of spiritual blindness. And in the case of the Jews, they were blinded by their privileges, and they were blinded by their secret hypocrisy. Third, and briefly,

### III. Blinded by Heartless Obedience:

Read 2:25-29

For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.<sup>26</sup> So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?<sup>27</sup> Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law.<sup>28</sup> For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.<sup>29</sup> But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

1. What Paul is telling us is that sin and righteousness have always been matters of the heart. Heartless obedience never pleases God.

2. If you have a solid block of rusted iron and bears a label "Gold," we would not for a moment believe it to be real gold. It's a fake; a phony. And so it is with those who display outward righteousness but whose heart is far from God.

- A. You have been baptized? baptism can't save you from the wrath of God.



- B. Have you been circumcised? Circumcision can't save you.
- C. Have you become a member of a good church? Church membership can't save you.
- D. Do you believe you are righteous enough to be acceptable to God? Your self-righteousness will never save you. It can only condemn you on the day of Judgment.

3. O my friend. Isn't it time to ask the Great Physician – Jesus Christ – to remove the cataracts from your eyes so you can see with clarity your sin and your need to get right with God? If you ask Him, he will give you spiritual sight. And if you are honest with Him about your you, He will forgive you and declare that because of the righteous life and atoning death of Jesus Christ, you are Justified in His sight.