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Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #13

February 28, 2021

The Horrors of Hypocrisy

Romans 2:17-29

I assume that most of you have heard of Ravi Zacharias, a world-famous and widely published Christian apologist. I heard him speak in person for the first time at a conference where I was also speaking in Orlando, Florida, back in the early 1990's. I was astounded by his range of knowledge. He displayed what appeared to be a photographic memory as he cited at length, without notes, extensive quotations of famous individuals. He was articulate, energetic, passionate, and many, to this day, attribute their Christian faith to his influence. His books sold more than 2,000,000 copies.

Ravi Zacharias was born in Chennai, India, in 1946, and died of spinal cancer on May 19, 2020. He was at one time widely regarded as the most powerful and persuasive apologist of our generation for the intellectual integrity of the Christian faith.

But tragically, soon after his death evidence emerged that he was also a sexual predator, a liar, and guilty of all manner of spiritual abuse and mismanagement of the funds contributed to his international ministry. I don't need or want to go into more detail about the double life that Zacharias was living. You can read it for yourself on numerous blogs and internet websites. And I have no way of knowing whether or not he is in heaven. I hope and pray he is.

My reason for citing the sordid story of Ravi Zacharias is because of the way it so clearly and tragically illustrates what I call the horror of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy has been defined in numerous ways, all of them helpful. But at the core of hypocrisy is the sinful way in which a person says, teaches, preaches, or writes one thing and lives and practices its moral opposite.

In ancient times the word "hypocrisy" was primarily used in relationship to the Greek theater. The noun form was used of an actor who assumed a role on the stage. Since actors in the ancient theater often wore masks, the word came to suggest one who wore a mask to hide his/her true feelings and thoughts, while putting on an outward show. Consequently, the word "hypocrisy" came to refer to someone who acts like or pretends to be something or someone which he/she, in reality, is not. To play the hypocrite, therefore, is to masquerade one's true thoughts and character while playing the part of someone else.

One of the ways that hypocrisy becomes entrenched in a person's soul is by an appeal that he/she makes to their ethnic identity or their education or their public notoriety or perhaps their family heritage. In other words, they think that because they hold degrees from prestigious universities, they can instruct others about truth and goodness but feel no pressure to live consistently with what they say to their audience. Or

perhaps they believe that because their father or grandmother was a famous and influential person, they are excused from the standards of life to which they hold everyone else accountable.

For some, it may be one's status as a celebrity or public figure, or one's personal wealth or physical appearance that they think excuses their behavior or in some manner justifies it. Or it may simply be that because of the benefits and privileges and blessings they enjoy in life that they think they are entitled to live a life of sensual self-indulgence while others should abide by certain moral principles.

Whatever the basis or cause of one's hypocrisy, when it is exposed it can be devastating. I have no doubt that there are many who were converted under Ravi Zacharias's ministry or were massively influenced by his defense of Christianity who are now wondering if what they believe is true or worth retaining.

Even talking about this man after his death feels unsettling. After all, he is not here to defend himself. And yet, we quite frequently mention the moral failures and inconsistencies in the lives of many who have long since died and are no longer able to come to their own defense. But, as I said, it isn't Zacharias's shortcomings that are the primary concern of my message today. My concern is with his hypocrisy and that of so many others, many of whom are still very much alive, and what we should learn from their failures. Of course, the real danger in this is speaking of another person's hypocrisy, only then to discover that I or you or others are just as guilty of it as they were! May God help us!

The concern of the apostle Paul in this long paragraph today is hypocrisy. But before we dive into the text, let me remind you again, ever so briefly, of what Paul is doing. He is playing the role of a ***spiritual prosecuting attorney***. His aim is to indict the entire human race, both Jew and Gentile, of sin. He began in Romans 1:18 to describe the sin and idolatry of the non-Jewish, or Gentile, world. He then turned in Romans 2:1 to remind his Jewish audience that they are also guilty before God. His conclusion comes in Romans 3:9 where he says,

“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” (Rom. 3:9).

He writes these words “so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God” (Rom. 3:19).

The Privileges and Blessings of the Jew (vv. 17-20)

I can briefly sum up the privileges and blessings of the Jewish people that are described in vv. 17-20. They don't require a great deal of explanation. There are 10 things Paul mentions:

- (1) They take pride in the name “Jew” (v. 17a).
- (2) They rely on the law of God (v. 17b).

(3) They boast in God (v. 17c).

By the way, these are good things. These are genuine blessings that were granted to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Jewish person could truly be grateful for such privileges. Paul continues.

(4) They know God's will (v. 18a).

(5) They approve what is excellent (v. 18b).

(6) They are instructed from the law (v. 18c).

(7) They provide moral guidance to those who are spiritually blind (v. 19a).

(8) They are a light to those who are in darkness (v. 19b; see Isa. 42:6-7).

(9) They are instructors of the foolish (v. 20a).

(10) They teach children (a reference to one's spiritual immaturity, not chronological age; v. 20b).

Paul sums it up by reminding them that the reason they can achieve these things is because God graciously granted to Israel the law in which they find "the embodiment of knowledge and truth" (v. 20c). These are all good things. These are gifts for which every Jewish man and woman should be thankful. Israel was a nation of the book. As Paul will say later in Romans 3:2, "the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God."

Hypocrisy Revealed (vv. 21-24)

But there is something profoundly wrong. How had some Jewish people responded to these blessings and wonderful privileges? They had taught others to live a moral life in conformity with God's revealed will, while at the same time violating the very moral standards to which they held others accountable. They were hypocrites! Here is how Paul put it in v. 21 – "you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself?" Or we could put it in words more familiar to us today: "For heaven's sake, people, practice what you preach!" (see Matt. 23:2-3).

Before we move on, let me say just a few words about a couple of things in this list of 10 privileges.

We need to be careful to avoid any hint of anti-Semitism. The name "Jew" as Paul employs it in v. 17 is not used in a pejorative or negative sense. Don't ever forget: Jesus was a Jew. Paul was a Jew. Peter was a Jew. Paul is not attacking the hypocrisy and externalism of the Jew because he is a Jew. The Jewish people of Paul's day had no monopoly on hypocrisy. The Gentile of Paul's day and our own is no less the target of his denunciation. Paul's point here is that merely bearing the title of "Jew" does not exempt a person from living consistently with the laws that God has laid out for his people.

Paul's point isn't to slur the ethnic Jew but to demonstrate that Jews, along with Gentiles, are all sinners and in need of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul will labor to point out that even with the innumerable

blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant and the Mosaic Covenant, the Jewish people need to hear and heed the gospel of Jesus.

Furthermore, their reliance on the law was a good thing (see Psalm 1:1-2; 119), unless they thought that by obeying it they could put God in their debt or insulate themselves from final judgment. Boasting in God is good, unless what you mean by that is: “God is *mine*, not yours, and you can’t have him!”

And let’s not forget that we, too, are a people of the book. We have been entrusted with the 66 inspired books of the Christian Bible. And we should listen closely to what Paul says, for merely having a Bible and even preaching from it and listening to it is no guarantee that we won’t make the same mistake that so many Jews of Paul’s day had made. We must guard our hearts lest after teaching others what the book says we fail to teach ourselves and fail to abide by what it commands. As long as the Bible remains only a book, a book in which we take pride for understanding it and proclaiming it, and yet fail to abide by what it says, we will fall prey to the same sinful arrogance and hypocrisy as the Jews did.

But the problem, as I said, is that the Jewish people had failed to live up to their calling. And he cites 5 examples to prove his point.

- (1) They teach others but then fail to teach themselves (v. 21a).
- (2) They denounce stealing all the while they themselves steal (v. 21b).
- (3) They loudly rebuke people for committing adultery while committing adultery themselves (v. 22a).
- (4) They abhor idols and idolatry, but rob temples (v. 22c).
- (5) They boast in the law of God but dishonor God by breaking that very law (v. 23).

The reference to “robbing temples” has sparked considerable debate. Is it literal or metaphorical? Probably the former, notes Schreiner, as “Paul highlights an inconsistency among the Jews. They claim to detest idolatry and spurn any association with idols, yet they are willing to be defiled by profiting from the very idols they detest” (141-42). Paul likely had in mind Deuteronomy 7:25 where Moses forbade profiting from the gold and silver taken from pagan temples.

It would be a mistake to think that Paul was accusing all Jews of being thieves, adulterers, or of having robbed temples. This certainly wouldn’t apply to Paul himself prior to his conversion. There were many Jewish people in the days of Jesus and Paul who were godly, humble, and by God’s grace did what they could to live sincere and genuine lives in obedience to the law of God, even if they didn’t do so perfectly. But there were also many who did not.

The same thing would apply to the Gentiles whom Paul rebuked in Romans 1. Not all Gentiles committed every sin that Paul mentions. Both there and here he is using “particularly blatant and shocking examples (like any good preacher) to illustrate the principle that Jews violated the law that they possessed” (Schreiner, 142). His point isn’t that all Jews commit every one of these sins, but that these sins are representative of the contradiction between a person’s claim and his/her conduct, and that inconsistency was pervasive in first-century Judaism.

One more thing. Isn't it interesting that Paul describes "breaking the law" of God as "dishonoring" *God* (v. 23). Most people don't think this way. They think of breaking the law in purely horizontal terms. It is a violation of a human ordinance or rule. Sin is perpetrating evil against another human being. Evil is done when I am abused or slandered or violated. But Paul says that the essence of sin and evil is dishonoring God! King David in the OT understood this. That is why in Psalm 51 when he confesses his adultery with Bathsheba and his complicity in the death of her husband, Uriah the Hittite, he says,

"Against you [God], you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Ps. 51:4).

The point is that Paul is decidedly and thoroughly God-centered in his thinking. We are self-centered or man-centered. He thought almost exclusively in terms of how our sin and idolatry affect God or reflect on God.

Initial Conclusion of the Impact of Hypocrisy (v. 24)

Paul then concludes his indictment of the Jews of his day by citing Isaiah 52:5 and the impact of their hypocrisy on the Gentile world:

"For, as it is written, 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you'" (Isa. 52:5).

God created and called out Israel for his glory, to be the instrument by which the Gentile world would see and know and celebrate the greatness and power and majesty of God (see Isa. 42:6-7). But Israel had failed in this mandate and had actually brought disrepute on the name of God.

The principle by which the Gentile reasoned was this: "A people are like their God. If the Jewish people behave like this, what reason do we have for believing in Yahweh?" Tragically, this is precisely what has happened in the past few years as the world has watched one prominent, celebrity pastor after another fall into some form of immorality or spiritual abuse. Should we really wonder why non-believers mock us and stay away from the church when so many well-known Christian leaders live lives of unmistakable hypocrisy?

Someone once said to the 19th century Baptist pastor Charles Spurgeon: "The Bible is the light of the world." "How can that be," responded Spurgeon, "when the world never reads the Bible? The Bible is the light of the Church. The Christian is the light of the world. The world reads the Christian, not the Bible." What message do they read in us?

When External Ritual replaces Internal Reality (vv. 25-27)

The problem that Paul then turns to address in vv. 25-29 is the belief that an external ritual compensates for, or excuses, the absence of an internal reality. Ritualism and a reliance on the supposed spiritual benefits of certain forms of liturgy are a constant threat to true spirituality. I can't recall where I came across these words from Robert C. Roberts, but he has given us a good description of the dangers of ritualism. In ritualism,

“you identify being a Christian with having certain experiences or doing certain actions, in church. The right sounds and sights and maybe smells, the right chants and vestments, exquisite music, and the right genuflections and self-crossings – all coordinated and blended like an eight-course French dinner – are calculated to create a mood of reverence and holy mystery. When these liturgical actions, performed in lush stained-glass darkness, send goosebumps roaming down your back and cause little floods of wetness to well up behind your eyeballs, then you know in your heart that you are a true Christian.”

If you can't identify with that expression of high church ritualism, perhaps a low church version will make sense to you. That is to say,

“if you're from Bumpkin Ridge you may need a different strategy than genuflections and incense. It's the old favorite hymns that make you feel the religion in your heart. 'Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me,' 'In the Garden,' 'Throw Out the Lifeline,' 'I love to tell the Story.' And it's not the priest crossing himself that makes you feel religious, but the thump of his fist on the pulpit, and the song leader flingin' his arms every which way. If there isn't enough arms-flingin' and Bible-thumping, the Holy Spirit just doesn't grip on you. And it's not the goose bumps traveling down the spine, but the sweat collecting in the armpits and hanging down from your glasses. If the high liturgy was a French dinner, this is a hotdog and a coke.”

Let me be clear. There is nothing wrong with liturgical forms of worship, so long as what you do externally is an expression of an internal sincerity and heartfelt love for God. The dangers of a purely external, performance-based orientation to the Christian life is always a threat no matter the form it assumes, no matter what kind of church you attend.

Paul says clearly in v. 25 that circumcision, which was the physical mark in the flesh that one was a Jew, is fine . . . if you obey the law. But if you trust in your membership in the covenant people of God and use that as an excuse to disobey God's law, your circumcision is worthless.

In much the same way, Paul says in v. 26 that the uncircumcised Gentile, who by God's grace and for God's glory strives to live an obedient, law-abiding life, will be regarded as if he were circumcised. In other words, in God's sight, regardless of whether he has the physical sign in his flesh of being a member of God's covenant people, he is regarded as such. In fact, it is the law-abiding uncircumcised Gentile who is saved and the law-defying circumcised Jew who will be judged by him on the final day (v. 27).

Being a Member of the People of God is a Matter of the Heart (vv. 28-29)

All this brings us to the most important thing Paul says. We find it in vv. 28-29. In these two concluding verses of Romans 2 Paul clearly defines what it means to be saved and a covenant member of the people of God. And he could not have said it with greater clarity when he declares that merely having the physical mark in your flesh is no guarantee that you belong to God. He is not saying that physical circumcision is bad. He is merely saying that the external ritual performed on the flesh is only of benefit when it is matched by the circumcision of the heart. Let me remind you of what Moses said to the people of Israel:

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good? Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the LORD set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day. Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn. For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe (Deut. 10:12-17).

To be circumcised in the heart is OT language for being born again. It refers to the metaphorical cutting away of the sinful flesh inwardly. The external mark in the physical flesh was always designed to remind the people of Israel that infinitely more important was the renewal and regeneration of their hearts.

Of course, when Paul says that “no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly” (v. 28a), he is not saying that a physical descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was not genuinely Jewish. They are still Jewish. But if they have not been circumcised inwardly by being born again of the Holy Spirit, their ethnic identity avails for nothing. ***The Gentile believer in Jesus is actually more “Jewish” than the Jewish person who rejects Jesus.*** The person who has been circumcised in “the heart, by the Spirit” (v. 29), that is to say, the person who has been born again and trusts Jesus, regardless of his/her ethnicity, is the true Jew!

So, if you are asking the question, “How can uncircumcised Gentiles belong to the people of God without submitting to the physical rite of circumcision,” Paul’s answer in verse 29 is that physical circumcision and being an ethnic Jew are not required. The only thing that counts is being a Jew “inwardly, . . . of the heart.” Thus, here Paul defines the essence of what it is to be a true member of God’s covenant people, and thus an heir to all the promises given in the OT. He couldn't be any more explicit than this: ***the true Jew, the true Israelite, is not that man or woman who has Abraham's blood in his veins but the one who has Abraham's faith in his heart.*** The mark of being a citizen of the kingdom of God is circumcision, not of the flesh, but of the heart. One's ethnic heritage is not decisive in determining who is among the covenant people of God. One's personal faith is.

Don't draw the wrong conclusion from this. Paul is not saying that an ethnic Israelite has no relationship to God. Far from it! He himself was an ethnic Israelite! He is simply saying that ***mere ethnicity*** is not what makes one a child of God. ***Renewal of the heart*** is the ultimate issue. So, ethnic Jews who are circumcised both in the body and inwardly, in the heart, by the Spirit, are the children of God and heirs to

all the promises. But he is also saying that ethnic Gentiles who are only circumcised inwardly, in the heart, by the Spirit, are also the children of God, co-heirs of all the promises.

Perhaps the best way to make this point is by looking at two additional texts. Among the many I could cite, let me mention only Ephesians 2:11-13, 18-19; and Galatians 3:16, 27-29.

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. . . . For through him we both [believing Jew and believing Gentile, together] have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you [believing Gentiles] are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God (Eph. 2:11-13, 18-19).

In Romans 2 Paul is saying that the Gentile who is born again, who is circumcised inwardly, is a Jew. Here in Ephesians 2 Paul says the same thing. Your faith in the blood of Christ has made you a fellow citizen in the commonwealth of Israel. You are now an heir to the covenants of promise, no less so than those who have Abraham’s blood in their veins. This same point is made again by Paul in Galatians 3.

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ referring to many, but referring to one, ‘And to your offspring,’ who is Christ. . . . For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise (Gal. 3:16, 27-29).

The one “offspring” or “seed” of Abraham for whom all the promises were originally intended was Jesus Christ. But just when you think that everyone else is excluded, Paul throws wide open the door and says that if you are in Christ by faith, you too are Abraham’s offspring, his seed, and thus you stand to inherit the promises in the same way that a born-again, believing Jew will.

As the true Israel of God, the Church, is comprised of both ethnic Gentiles and ethnic Jews. Regardless of ethnicity, regardless of the blood that courses through your veins, regardless of your DNA, if you trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior you are the offspring/seed of Abraham and thus the heir of all the promises made to the OT patriarchs. This by no means precludes a possible future ingathering or salvation of ethnic Jews at the time of Christ’s second coming. What it does mean is that when ethnic Jews are saved, they are incorporated into the Church and made one body and fellow heirs with believing Gentiles. There is only one people of God, the Church, the true Israel, in which both ethnic Jews and ethnic Gentiles have been circumcised in heart and made heirs to the covenant promises.

You may be wondering why it is so important for you, a believing Gentile, to be regarded by God as if you were a Jew. The reason is simple. All of God’s saving blessings have come to this world through the covenant he made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. There is no salvation outside of Israel. That is why

Paul will tell us in Romans 11 that we believing Gentiles have been grafted into the one olive tree of Israel. Again, as Paul put it in Ephesians 2, we who once were far off have been brought near to salvation and made heirs of the promises by faith in the blood of Christ, who has taken believing Jews and believing Gentiles and made them into one new man, the Church of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Hypocrisy is horrible. Hypocrisy is devastating to the reputation of the church. Worse still, hypocrisy causes the unbelieving world to mock our God and to disregard him as unworthy of their affection and love and worship.

When I hear of the double life and hypocrisy of someone like Ravi Zacharias, or any other professing Christian, famous or unknown, I tremble. And I cry out to God, "Oh, Lord, please sustain me with your grace. Uphold me in my faith. Don't let me wander from the path of righteousness. Keep me committed to you. May the life that people see of me externally be consistent with what is true of me internally. Let not my life or my name or that of Bridgeway become a reproach to the gospel."