

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

WHAT HYPOCRISY DOES

Romans 2:17-24

By

Steven J. Cole

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Romans, Lesson 12

What Hypocrisy Does Romans 2:17-24

A pastor had been preaching on the importance of daily Bible reading. He and his wife were invited for a meal at a parishioner's home. While there, the pastor's wife saw a note that the hostess had written on her kitchen calendar: "Pastor/Mrs. for dinner—dust all Bibles" (from *Reader's Digest* [March, 1990], p. 129).

Hypocrisy—presenting ourselves as something that we know we're not—is one of the most subtle and dangerous of sins. Seven times Jesus thundered against the religious leaders of His day, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites" (Matt. 23:12, [14], 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29; v. 14 is probably not original). He warned the disciples (Luke 12:1), "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy." Leaven spreads subtly and pervasively, until the whole lump of dough is affected. So does hypocrisy. It is a perpetual danger for the religious, and especially for religious leaders. It is the root sin that Paul confronts in our text.

From Romans 1:18-3:20, Paul shows why all people need the gospel of God's righteousness imputed to the believing sinner: because we all have sinned and fall short of God's glory (Rom. 3:23). First (1:18-32), he shows how the pagans who suppress the truth in unrighteousness are guilty before God. Then (2:1-16), he shows how outwardly moral people have violated their own standards and thus are guilty before God. In doing so, he quietly sneaks up on the Jews, who prided themselves on their special standing before God. But he doesn't mention them by name until verse 17. Up to this point, they have nodded in approval as Paul indicts the Gentiles. But now, he springs the trap on them.

The Jew thought himself exempt from God's judgment on three grounds: (1) He was a son of Abraham (John 8:33), not a Gentile dog! (2) Unlike the pagans, he had God's Law, revealed to Moses on the holy mountain. (3) He was circumcised, again in contrast to the defiled Gentiles.

Paul shows how being a Jew by birth cannot save anyone (2:17, 28-29); how having the Law cannot save those who do not keep it (2:17-24); and, how being circumcised in the flesh is of no avail if the circumcised man does not keep the entire Law (2:25-27; this analysis from Alva McClain, *Romans: The Gospel of God's Grace* BMH Books], pp. 81-82.)

In our text, Paul mainly focuses on the Law (2:17, 18, 20, 23 [twice]). He is applying the point of 2:13, "it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified." The Jews will not escape God's righteous judgment because they were Jews and possessed the Law, unless they obeyed the Law, which they did not do. So he exposes their hypocrisy and shows the spiritual devastation of hypocrisy:

Hypocrisy deceives the hypocrite, damages unbelievers,
and dishonors God.

If you've ever been deceived by a con artist, you know that the reason he got your money is that you didn't know at the time that you were being deceived. If you had known, you wouldn't have let him get your money. And, once you find out, you're embarrassed that it happened, and so you tend to cover it up in order to save face.

Hypocrites don't get into hypocrisy deliberately by thinking, "I'd like to bring God's judgment down on myself by being a hypocrite. That sounds like the way to go!" Rather, due to pride, they think, "I want people to respect me. If they knew what I was really like, they wouldn't respect me. So I need to keep up a good front. Besides, everyone does that to some extent." So he tries to impress others, forgetting that God examines the heart. He ends up deceiving himself in the worst way. At the heart of this process is this basic principle:

1. Hypocrisy deceives the hypocrite because he knows the truth but doesn't obey it.

James 1:22 states the principle: "But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers, *who delude themselves*" (emphasis added). These Jews that Paul confronts felt secure before God because of their religious heritage as Jews. They had God's Law; they

could confidently teach it to others. But they were deluded because they were hearers of the Law, but not doers of it.

At the outset, we need to understand that this is not a racial attack on the Jews. Paul was not being anti-Semitic. He himself was a Jew. He loved the Jewish people so much that he said that he would be willing to spend eternity in hell if it meant the salvation of the Jews (Rom. 9:1-3)! Any form of racism against any race is sinful. If we're honest, as we read Paul's indictment of the Jews here, we will see ourselves, because we're all prone to hypocrisy. We all easily fall into the trap of trying to impress others with how spiritual we are, while our hearts are far from God. So we need to apply these verses carefully to our own hearts! Paul shows five ways that the hypocrite is deceived:

A. The hypocrite is deceived because he may know the doctrine of election, but he misapplies it.

Paul first hits the Jew for taking pride in his birth as a Jew (he will hit this further in 2:28-29). When Jesus confronted the Jews with being enslaved to sin, they arrogantly pointed to the fact that they were Abraham's children and even made the ridiculous statement, we "have never been enslaved to anyone" (John 8:33; see, also, vv. 39, 53). They knew that they were God's elect, but they grossly misapplied it!

Moses had told the Jews (Deut. 7:6), "For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth." But he knew that they were prone to get puffed up with pride, thinking that God chose them because they deserved it. So he goes on to tell them that God didn't choose them because of anything in them, but rather because of His love and His faithfulness to His covenant promises to their forefathers.

Just as God chose the Jews to be His people, so He chooses us to believe in Christ and be His people (1 Pet. 2:9; Eph. 1:4-5; 1 Thess. 1:4; Rom. 8:29; 9:11-23; 1 Cor. 1:26-30; etc.). He did not do this because He foresaw anything of merit in us, including our faith. Rather, He did it to display His unmerited favor (grace), so that we would glorify Him (Eph. 1:6).

So if you boast in being one of God's elect, you've missed the whole point of the doctrine of election. Knowing that God chose us in spite of our sin should humble us and cause us to glorify Him for His mercy and love.

B. The hypocrite is deceived because he knows God's commandments, but does not obey them on the heart level.

Paul says of the Jew, you "rely on the Law." All of the things that Paul mentions in verses 17-20 are good, in and of themselves. There were many advantages to being a Jew (Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4-5). It's good to rely on God's Law, if you truly obey it. It's good to know His will and be morally discerning. The problem was that the Jews relied on the fact that they had received God's Law as if it would magically protect them, even though they didn't obey it.

Paul probably had in mind Micah 3:11, where the prophet rebuked the Jewish religious leaders for their sin and then said, "Yet they lean on the Lord saying, 'Is not the Lord in our midst? Calamity will not come upon us.'" In the LXX, the word "lean upon" is the same rather uncommon Greek verb that Paul uses to say that they "rely on" the Law. So, the Jews in Paul's day thought that relying on the Law would protect them from judgment, even though they disobeyed it (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], pp. 159-160).

Of course, the Jews did obey some of the external requirements of the Law. They were fastidious about ceremonial cleanliness. They meticulously tithed even their table spices. They fasted and prayed at the stipulated times. But Jesus rebuked them because while they honored God with their lips, their hearts were far from Him (Mark 7:6). They knew God's commandments, but they just kept those that could be seen by men, so that they looked spiritual. They didn't seek to please God from the heart. Hypocrisy is all about maintaining outward appearances, with no regard to obedience from the heart.

C. The hypocrite is deceived because he boasts in God, not to honor God, but to honor himself.

Paul says (2:17), you "boast in God." Again, this is a good thing to do in and of itself. Jeremiah says (Jer. 9:23-24), "Thus says the Lord, 'Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the

mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on the earth; for I delight in these things,' declares the Lord." Paul says (1 Cor. 1:30-31), "But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.'"

So boasting in the Lord is good, if our aim is to give Him all glory for our salvation. But Paul's Jewish readers were boasting in God in the sense of elevating themselves above the pagan Gentiles, who did not know God. It was a form of spiritual pride, where they said, "We know the only true God, but you don't! We're better than you are!" They were like the super-spiritual faction in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:12). Some were saying, "I am of Paul," and others, "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas." But some boasted, "I am of Christ!" They were boasting in God, but not to honor God, but to honor themselves. But they were deceived by their hypocrisy.

D. The hypocrite is deceived because he knows theological fine points, not for the purpose of obedience, but to impress others.

Paul says (2:18), you "know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law." Again, these are good things in and of themselves. We should be diligent to study God's Word so that we know His will. His Word teaches us discernment, so that we can approve the things that are essential (or, "excellent," ESV). This refers to moral discernment. But, as Charles Hodge (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 61) comments on that phrase, "It was not their moral judgments, but their moral conduct that was in fault." It is good to be "instructed out of the Law," that is, God's Word. Biblical and theological knowledge is a good thing, in that it helps us to know God and His ways as He has revealed Himself.

But the goal of understanding theology is never to be able to win arguments or impress others with our great knowledge. Rather, it should humble our hearts before God and lead us to worship Him more fervently and obey Him more thoroughly.

Then Paul turns to how his Jewish readers applied their spiritual privileges. We learn a final way that hypocrisy deceives us:

E. The hypocrite is deceived because he confidently teaches others, but does not apply the Word to himself.

Paul continues (2:19-20), you “are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth.” God appointed Israel to be “a light to the nations, to open blind eyes” (Isa. 42:6-7). If they had done it with humility, it was a proper thing to do.

But everyone who teaches God’s Word must first apply it to himself. Knowledge without obedience puffs us up with pride (1 Cor. 8:1), which is the root of hypocrisy. Spiritually proud hypocrites who have a lot of knowledge without obedience look down on the blind, foolish, and immature that they teach. But when you apply the truth to yourself first, it humbles you as you realize where you’ve come from and how much you still need to grow. You realize that if God had not graciously shed His light on you, you’d still be in the dark, too!

I once wrote a short article on preaching titled, “The Gospel Boomerang.” I pointed out how preaching is a hazardous occupation. You aim your biblical arrows at your congregation, intending to hit them where they need to change. But you quickly discover that God’s Word is not just an arrow—it’s also a boomerang! It comes back and clobbers the preacher with how *he* needs to change! As John Calvin said, “It would be better for [the preacher] to break his neck going up into the pulpit if he does not take pains to be the first to follow God” (cited by T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching* [Westminster/John Knox Press], p. 40). Before we teach others, we need to apply the Word to our own hearts.

That’s what Paul goes on to confront these Jewish teachers with (2:21-22): “You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?”

Paul’s first two examples are easy enough to understand. Sadly, we’ve all known of preachers who have done what he ac-

cuses the Jews of doing. They have preached against stealing, but then it comes out that they were embezzling money from the church. Or, they preached against adultery, but they are exposed for committing that very sin. It happened with the Jewish religious leaders in Paul's day. It still happens today. Whenever it happens, it's a spiritual tragedy.

But what does Paul mean when he accuses the Jews of robbing temples? Almost all scholars agree that this does not refer to sacrilege (KJV), but to robbing pagan temples to get the idols or their gold for sale. But we don't have much evidence from history that the Jews were known for robbing pagan temples. Moses warned the Israelites that when they conquered pagan nations, they must burn the pagan idols with fire and not covet the gold or silver on them (Deut. 7:25). In Acts 19:37, the town clerk who quieted the Ephesian riot, said of Paul and his men, these men "are neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of our goddess." So, perhaps the practice was more widespread than we know about.

But it is still a bit puzzling as to why Paul picked *these* three sins to bring against the Jews. While some Jewish leaders may have been guilty of such flagrant sins, most Jews would probably have said, "Yes, Paul, we agree that those sins are terrible. Shame on anyone who *does* these things, but we don't do them." So why did Paul bring up *these* sins?

He may have been picking especially shocking sins as examples to argue that the Jews did not keep the Law they possessed and taught (Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], pp. 133-134). He could be saying that although not all Jews did these things, the fact that some do them illustrates that having the Law and teaching it does not spare you from God's judgment if you don't practice it. The implication, then, would be, "Maybe you don't do these sins, but do you keep the whole law? Are you without sin?" (The previous two thoughts are from John Piper, "The Effect of Hypocrisy," Part 2, Dishonoring God, on desiringgod.org.) Douglas Moo explains (*ibid.*, p. 165), "It is not, then, that all Jews commit these sins, but that these sins are representative of the contradiction between claim and conduct that *does* pervade Judaism."

To summarize, Paul is saying that hypocrisy deceives the hypocrite because he knows the truth, but he doesn't obey it on the

heart level. His knowledge feeds his pride, rather than humbles him, because he doesn't examine his own heart and teach himself first. But, hypocrisy not only deceives the hypocrite. Also,

2. Hypocrisy damages unbelievers.

"For 'the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,' just as it is written" (2:24). Paul is citing Isaiah 52:5, where because of Israel's sin, the nation has been destroyed and the people taken into captivity. Because of their sin, the Gentiles mock their God, who was not, in their minds, able to deliver them. But the real cause of their captivity was not God's inability to rescue, but rather Israel's disobedience. It made their God look bad.

The point is, if we tell others that we're Christians, but we're living in disobedience to God, unbelievers will mock the Christian faith. If a professing Christian is dishonest in business or immoral in his personal life or abusive towards his family, the world concludes, "Why follow their God? Who needs that kind of life?" And while God is sovereign in saving His elect, humanly speaking, a sinning Christian keeps a needy sinner from the only good news that can save him. We were supposed to be a light to those in darkness (2:19), but we ourselves were in the dark. We may well be the only "Bible" that those in the world around us ever read. Our lives should make them want to know our God.

Hypocrisy deceives the hypocrite and damages unbelievers. Finally, and most seriously, ...

3. Hypocrisy dishonors God.

Verse 23 may be a rhetorical question or it may be read as a statement: "You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, you dishonor God." This is the root sin of all sin, to dishonor or not to glorify God: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). In Romans 1:21, the Jews would have cheered as Paul indicted the Gentiles because they did not honor God or give thanks. But now Paul brings the same charge against the Jews. God chose Israel to be a glory to Him (Isa. 43:7). But by their disobedience, they have failed to honor God. In the same way, God chose us to be "to the praise of the glory of His grace" (Eph. 1:4, 6). But if we disobey His Word, we dishonor Him.

Sometimes, living in obedience to God's Word is presented as the path to blessing, and it is. If we obeyed God's Word by loving our wives as Christ loved the church and if we consistently showed God's kindness and grace toward our children, we would be blessed with happy families. God knows what is best for us and obedience to His Word brings blessing. Disobedience always results in pain and trouble.

But the main reason we should want to obey God is not to be blessed, but rather, to honor Him. The main reason we should fear disobedience is that God's holy name would be dishonored. He is infinitely worthy of all honor and glory and praise. So we should fear the sin of hypocrisy, of putting a veneer of godliness over disobedient hearts, because we do not want to dishonor the all-glorious God who saved us for His glory.

Conclusion

Since deception is always a tricky thing to overcome, how can we overcome the deception of hypocrisy? There are no slick formulas, but let me offer a few action points:

First, fight daily to maintain reality with God on the heart level. Meet with Him in the Word and in prayer, not to check off that you did your "quiet time," but to come before Him and expose everything in your heart to Him. Confess your sins and your struggles. Seek His strength. Be aware that He examines your heart (1 Thess. 2:4).

Second, cultivate honesty and humility towards others. Don't try to impress others with your godliness. Let them know that you are weak, but the Lord is strong. Pick up Stuart Scott's booklet, "From Pride to Humility" on the book table and go over it often.

Finally, when you read and meditate on the Bible, aim at applying it personally. Ask, "So what? How am I supposed to live in light of this text?" And, if you struggle with a particular sin (anger, lust, greed, etc.), memorize relevant verses to help you apply it. Don't let the sin of hypocrisy deceive you, damage unbelievers, or dishonor our glorious God!

Application Questions

1. How can we cultivate the constant sense that Paul had, that God “examines our hearts” (1 Thess. 2:4)?
2. How honest should you be with others? Should you share *all* of your struggles? If you don't, are you being a hypocrite?
3. How can we cultivate genuine humility and thus avoid hypocrisy?
4. Why should honoring God, not seeking happiness, be our number one priority? What is practically involved in this?

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