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God Will Judge Everyone – But by What Standard?

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Series: The Verdict
Romans 2:12-29

**BIG IDEA – GOD'S OBJECTIVE MORAL STANDARD AND WHY BOTH
RELIGIOUS AND IRRELIGIOUS PEOPLE ARE ACCOUNTABLE
BEFORE HIM**

So, there's this new question I love to ask. In the back of my mind, I've been asking this question a lot. Here it is: "Based on what?" When somebody shares their opinion with me, gives me some feedback, I'm kind of thinking in the back of my mind, "Where's this coming from? What standard is this based on?"

For example, how many of you guys can relate to this? How many of you have ever gotten the feedback that you seem too busy? Maybe you're working too much. Now, I don't know. You might be a workaholic, but here's some data for you. The average working American works 34 hours a week. A little bit less than I thought. In the 1800s, the average working American worked 70 hours a week.

So, if you just take whatever you've been doing, working too much, and plop yourself down in 1850, your feedback would magically become, "You're a lazy bum." Look. People share their opinion and give feedback based on what they do, what they've seen done, what they feel or sense, and all that's fine. But we love an objective standard, don't we? I love an objective standard, especially if you're going to give me critical feedback. I'd like the standard to be objective.

Now, if you want to affirm me, you don't have to use an objective standard. It could be subjective based on feelings. I'll take it. That's fine. But if you're going to give me critical feedback, I'd like to know what the standard you're using is. Like, I don't like getting pulled over west of Wilkesboro on 421, but if the officer is like, "Hey, bud. The sign objectively says 55; I got you going 75," it's like, "Ah, it makes sense. I get it."

Furthermore, people lose their minds if they get a judgment they don't like and the standard is not objective. For example, the March Madness selection committee. The NCAA basketball tournament... How do they decide who gets in? So, you mean to tell me there's some group of people somewhere that goes into a room last year, and the Tar Heels get in with a single quad 1 win? Some people like that. Some people don't. I see some Carolina blue in here. Nice win last night, by the way. I'm not trying to make enemies. All right. There you go. Now everybody is happy.

I mean, don't we love an objective standard? Anyway, we're talking about standards today, *God's* standards. God has objective moral standards. If you have your Bibles in here at all of our campuses...Lexington, Multiply...turn or type to Romans 2. We'll be starting in verse 12. I'll meet you there in just a minute.

This whole time, as we've been talking about, the apostle Paul is building an argument driving toward a verdict, which is God's moral judgment on the people he created. Now, people get all upset about this. "Oh, God is going to judge people." Well, is he allowed to do this? Is the eternal God allowed to have standards for you and me that are higher than the standards we have for ourselves? Yes, he's allowed to do this.

So, the question for us as we start our time today is...*God's verdict is based on what?* If God is going to use a moral standard and apply it to my life and give me a verdict, it would be helpful to know what that standard is. What Paul is going to tell us today, very interestingly, is that everybody knows God's objective moral standard.

Let's read this. We'll pick it up in verse 12. ***"For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law."*** When Paul says the *law* here, he's referring to the Mosaic law, the law God gave the people through Moses. Verse 13: ***"For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified."***

All right. It's going to take me a minute to explain this, but what Paul is telling us here is that everyone, both of these groups, those with and without the law... Everyone knows God's standard. Paul is going to call those two groups *Jews* and *Gentiles* today. I'm going to call them, basically, *religious* and *irreligious* today.

To be super clear who's in those two groups... In the religious group, it's just those with access to the Bible, those with the law. In the irreligious group, it's everybody else, those without the Bible. Paul is going to say that both of these groups are going to be held morally accountable to God.

Okay. Why? Well, let's start with the religious. This is easier. Right? What access to the moral standard do *they* have? Well, that's the group of people with Bibles. In the

end, when God gives *that* group his verdict, he's going to use the Bible as the standard to give them a verdict. That's why it says they will perish under the law. Well, what about the other group of people? How do *they* have access? It actually doesn't seem quite fair to me. How are these people going to be held morally accountable when they don't even have a Bible? Let's keep reading. Verse 14:

"For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus."

So, *this* group of people, without the Bible, have a law too. They have something by nature. The religious have the code of Scripture, and the irreligious have the conscience. All right, the conscience. We need to talk about this for a minute, because it's a very biblical concept, but I'm not sure we all mean the same thing when we talk about it. So let's define it.

Your conscience is your own internal moral compass. It's your own internal sense of right and wrong. It kind of works like a moral alarm system. There are a few things to know about the conscience. Actually, there's a lot to know about the conscience, but three things for our purposes today.

First of all, God gives it. The conscience is a God-given gift to everyone. Everyone has a conscience. Christians have a conscience, but non-Christians have a conscience. Atheists have a conscience. Hitler had a conscience. That's interesting. Rich, poor, old, young... Everybody has a conscience.

Well, actually, I should say, "Except for Android users." They don't have a conscience. I mean, honestly, how could they have a conscience? They continue to offend the rest of us with that green text bubble, and they feel no shame for this. They just keep doing it. If they had a conscience, they'd feel some shame for this.

In all seriousness, this actually leads to the second thing your conscience does. It can produce guilt. It can produce shame because it testifies to God's universal moral standard. Or in simple language, it tells you what God wants. This is verse 14. They've never read the law, but they do what the law requires by nature.

You can see this most obviously in little kids. Just think about any little kid you've ever seen. If you have little kids... I think about my 1-year-old son. He has been going through this food throwing phase where at the end of every meal, he grabs the messiest thing he can find, pulls his hand back, and then he looks for me, and I'm looking at him.

You can see the alarm going off. You see it. It's like, "Buddy, don't do it. Don't do it, buddy. Don't do it." He's like, "Nah, man, I've got to do it," and he chucks his food. Then Dad says, "Lukey, no. We don't throw our food, Luke." Then you can see the conscience. It's a guilty conscience. It's pretty pathetic. Sometimes he starts bawling like his world is falling apart. It's a guilty conscience.

Now look. He's 1 year old. He does not know the Bible verse that he should obey his parents, but his conscience is already testifying to him that that's what he should be doing. This isn't even just a Christian idea. This idea of moral development in little kids... They've done a lot of modern research on this. We're talking Yale, NIH...some big organizations. They have come to the conclusion that it's not just nurture; it's also nature. There's something innate happening here. God did it. It testifies of God's universal moral standard.

Hang on. Before we leave this point... As I was thinking about this, a question popped up for me. This is actually a little bit troubling. Here it is. If my conscience affirms me in something, but your conscience affirms you in something else, how can we say that it testifies to a universal moral standard? Does it not actually testify to moral relativism? No, because there's a third thing to know. Sin warps it.

God gives it, it tells us what he wants, but just about as soon as kids' consciences are helping them discern morality, sin is trying to warp them. Just as soon as my son's conscience is telling him he should obey his dad, sin is telling him Dad is holding out on him and the good life is chucking his food at the end of every meal. Sin warps it. The Bible talks a lot about this. It says very strong language about the conscience. It can be defiled. It can be seared as with a hot iron. It can be weakened.

Honestly, if you'll humor me on this, Jiminy Cricket is actually a pretty good example for how this works. Look. Things that are hard to understand need to be personified. Do you guys remember that old Disney movie *Pinocchio*? Remember how that works? As soon as Pinocchio is animated, he's given this little cricket, Jiminy, with his very high-pitched male singing voice. (*Very* high-pitched. It's unbelievable, honestly.) And he's helping Pinocchio discern God's universal moral standard, so to speak.

As Pinocchio goes along, that small voice of his conscience, Jiminy, gets drowned out by some bad friends, by Stromboli and Honest John. Pinocchio starts to disregard his conscience. He starts to go against his conscience, argue with his conscience, and run away from him. He starts to abuse his conscience. Then, in the end... Do you guys remember this? Pinocchio has just given himself over to pleasure in Pleasure Island. It's so on the nose. Right? He himself starts to warp into a donkey.

Now, am I saying that if you go against your conscience enough you start to turn into a donkey? Well, the analogy breaks down, but kind of. It gets so bad in the end,

Pinocchio can't fix himself with moral effort anymore. What he needs is a loving father who made him and loves him to come looking for him. Geppetto comes looking for him. You didn't know there was so much spiritual truth in *Pinocchio*, did you?

The same is true with us. In its original, uncorrupted state, our conscience is helping us understand God's moral standard, but we all disregard it and bang it around and abuse it and rewire the alarm system to various degrees in various ways enough that we end up with a pretty dysfunctional relationship with it. But before we did all that, it testified to God's universal moral standard.

Okay. There's more to be said about the conscience. I have to move on. There's more to get to. I spent the time I did on it because it's a critical piece of Paul's argument for how God is going to bring his verdict to irreligious people. Here it is concisely. God has written his law in three places: creation (we talked about that a few weeks ago), the conscience, and the code of Scripture. Everybody in the world has access to those first two, and everybody *here* has access to the third one as well.

So, in the end, God is going to hold people morally accountable according to the standard they have access to. For the religious, those of us with Bibles sitting on our laps in here, he's going to hold us accountable to that standard. For the irreligious, those without access to the Bible...

It says here they're going to perish without the law, which means God is not going to bring out his Bible to accuse them. He's not going to need to. He's going to judge them according to the gift of their conscience. And it *is* a gift, but it might not feel like that, because it introduces a giant problem.

It's so obvious, but I'll go ahead and say it. Access to the moral standard doesn't equal *doing* the moral standard. Access to moral truth doesn't equal *doing* moral truth. And problem. Verse 13: "It's not the hearers who are justified but the doers who will be justified."

All right. Now Paul is going to swivel his attention away from the irreligious group toward the religious group of people. This is the group of people with Bibles. He's going to say, "Hey, guys. You're a lot better at *seeing* the truth than *doing* the truth." He's going to start to address the religious spirit.

I'm going to read the next four verses. Paul is talking about the religious spirit. Honestly, it sounds pretty good to me, for the most part, but there's a big problem with it. See if you guys can figure out what it is. Let's start in verse 17.

"But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; and

if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth..."

Most of that sounds pretty good. Right? Where's the problem? It's all the way back in verse 17. The religious spirit relies on the law. These people rely on their own moral effort in keeping the law, which is fine if you keep it from a pure heart, but if you don't... Verse 13: "It's not the hearers who will be justified but the doers who will be justified."

All right. The religious spirit. We have to talk about this. How do you know if you have one? What are the symptoms of the sickness that is this religious effort and activity trying to earn God's favor? The late, great Tim Keller...God bless the man...very helpfully described the religious spirit.

First of all, he says, if you have a religious spirit, you're *smug*. What a great word. You're smug. You're looking for moral high ground. You want to feel morally superior. What does this look like? In this type of a situation, if your friend walks up to you and starts to open up to you about one of their kids with some behavioral issues... They're like, "Oh, I just can't figure it out. We're having a hard time."

You don't say this, but if you have a religious spirit inside, you're like, "Thank God I've been so good about discipleship and discipline in *my* home. We're not struggling like that." You don't say it, but it's in here. That's a religious spirit. I don't want to just give counter-vision. What would a *gracious* spirit look like? "Oh, goodness. Parenting is so hard. *So* hard. My family has their own problems. Plenty of them are my fault, and praise God, he fills in the gaps." That would be a gracious spirit.

So, first of all, the religious spirit is smug. What else? It's *overly sensitive*. If you have a religious spirit, no one can confront you about a sin area. It's too devastating for you, because that confrontation would be an attack on the very reason you think God loves you, your own righteousness. You're overly sensitive.

Third, *judgmental*. You can find fault in anybody. You kind of like to do this, actually, particularly with people who are struggling in areas where you think you're doing pretty good. It fuels a religious spirit to do this, because it confirms the belief that you've achieved it, that you've been good enough to earn God's love.

At the same time, you have this sneaking suspicion that maybe you *haven't* been good enough, which leads to number four. The religious spirit is *anxious*. It's morally anxious. You have this hunch, like, "Maybe God's standard is higher than my performance," so you anxiously just keep on trying. It's a terrible place to be. I've been there, honestly. It's a terrible place to be.

Fifth, the religious spirit is *hypocritical*. This is what Paul is going to talk about here. Let's read this. Verse 21: "**...you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?**" Ouch. Paul is being very direct here. He's like, "Hey, religious people. You guys affirm the Bible. Good job. Do you *do* the Bible?" He's like, "Hey, guys. Can we just be honest? Y'all are hypocrites."

All right. Hypocrisy. We have to talk about hypocrisy. Hypocrisy judges others by a standard you yourself fail. Hypocrisy says, "Justice for them, grace for me." Really, we all struggle with it at some level. It's on a spectrum, but we all struggle at some level. People hate hypocrisy. We hate it. People get unusually upset with hypocrites. Even Jesus got unusually upset with the religious hypocrites of his day, the Pharisees.

Why do people hate hypocrisy so much? What's going on there? Well, it does some pretty damaging things. First of all, it *demeans others*. Hypocrisy is demeaning. Hypocrites use other words to basically say, "I'm better than you, and here's what *you* should do." That's the "You who teach others, do you not teach yourself?" It comes from a person in a position of power a lot of times...teacher, politician, pastor, professor, parent.

Honestly, guys, I've struggled with this in parenting. For example, my 4- and 6-year-old love sweets, and they're already kind of crazy. A lot of the time, I'm like, "Guys, you can't have sweets. We're not doing it. Can't have sweets." But then two minutes later, I'll be in the pantry, hiding, eating Twix out of their Halloween candy bucket. Guilty. I'm being serious. True story.

I'm trying to be self-aware enough to not have a point in this sermon called "Everybody struggles with hypocrisy" and just talk about how everybody else struggles with hypocrisy. In all seriousness, parents, let me talk to us for a second here. Our example must exceed our exhortation. Our life must exceed our lecture. Sometimes, what we think is discernment our kids are going to see as hypocrisy.

What could this look like? Moms... I mean, it could look a million different ways, but it could look like *this*, potentially. Maybe you are hyper-aware of the dangers of giving your kids their phone too early. Fair enough. When your family leaves the restaurant, you talk about how sad it was that the family at the table next to you were on their devices the whole time. Fair enough. But can you see the effect your own phone is having on *you*?

You know, your daughter came in the kitchen the other day. She had a hard day at school. She was going to open up to you and talk to you about it. She started with

some small talk, but you gave her one-word answers and didn't really make eye contact and just kept scrolling. It can look a lot of different ways.

Dads, what could it look like for us? Particularly, if I could be so bold to talk to dads of adult kids. Your son calls you up. He just wants to use you as a sounding board, process his life with you. That's great. Praise the Lord you have that relationship with your son. But he can't hardly get the words out before you launch right into the lecture, right into advice mode. Look. I get it. Dads, we want to fix things. I get it. It comes from a good place. It does.

But you launch right into the lecture. You don't listen. And here's where it's demeaning. The boy is grown up now. He's a man. He can see things a little bit more clearly, and he's like, "Man, Dad. You have a lot of advice for me, but I never see *you* open up yourself to anybody for any advice. I'd take it a little bit better if I ever saw you take advice from anybody else." He's feeling demeaned. It's not your intent, but it's happening.

We can do this a million different ways, but, hey, parents, good news, not just bad news. Here's some good news. If you realize you've done this in an area, and you go to your kids and are like, "Hey, bud. I've done this, and I'm sorry. Do you forgive me? I'm sorry for doing this," watch how much grace they'll slam on you. They want to do it. It's not a promise, but it's a principle. I bet it'll happen.

So, first of all, hypocrisy is demeaning. What else? Hypocrisy *destroys trust*. If you realize you've been following a hypocrite, it destroys the trust there. Rightly so, honestly. I mean, my goodness. I could talk about this from a million different angles. I could give the most extreme example and hit, like, two people in here, but here's how I want to talk about it. Can we all just think together about the opportunity for hypocrisy on social media? The incentive structure is there, literally, and the distance is there.

How many of you guys have heard of Ruby Franke? Ruby was a super-popular "momfluencer" a couple of years ago. She had created a following of two and a half million subscribers on her YouTube channel. That's pretty good. She had over one billion views of the videos on her channel. She had this channel about a tough love parenting style, like, a parenting coach type of thing.

Well, two years ago, they found her 12-year-old son, malnourished, dehydrated, with duct tape on his wrists and ankles and open wounds. The police found her 9-year-old daughter in a similar state. Ruby was a hypocrite. She abused her own children, which is terrible in itself, obviously. But then, through the power of social media, she turned around and taught two and a half million people how to be better parents. Two and a half million people followed her parenting advice.

It's not usually *that* extreme. Sometimes it's a little more subtle. To beat the point up, can I talk about the "tradwife" thing for a second? I mean, after last week, I should be able to talk about anything. You guys do realize that the person modeling for you the simple life and how to be a homeschool farm mom has a tripod on her countertop, modeling for you the simple life. Or worse, a film crew in her house. "What do you mean a film crew?" I don't know. How's the camera panning? How's that happening?

You do realize that if the sourdough bread doesn't come out right or if the kids start whining, they probably do another take. Now look. Do you need to lead a simpler life? Do you need to homeschool your kids? I don't know. Maybe. But I wouldn't do it just because you see Hannah Neeleman doing it. Hannah Neeleman uniquely gets to make millions of dollars being a homeschool farm mom, which is not exactly an opportunity *you're* going to have.

All right. I realize I'm getting a little animated. I'll calm down. Here's why I'm getting so animated. Truly, I see people, my friends, making life decisions with heavy influence based on this type of stuff, and I'm not convinced any of it's real. I'm not. Don't give these people too big of a microphone at the decision-making table of your life. Moms, don't let them make you feel bad about yourself.

Okay. I'll calm down. Is it okay to take advice from people on social media? Yes. Is there good stuff out there? Yes, of course. Are they hypocrites? Are they tricking you? I don't know. This is my point. You don't know. How can you know? I'm just saying it's going to be harder for an older woman in your Community Group to trick you.

Maybe give *her* a bigger microphone. Take her out to coffee and be like, "Hey, your kids seem great, and your marriage seems great. How are you holding all this together?" Then take her unfiltered advice and give it a little more value than the filtered advice on your feed. Make sense?

All right. Hypocrisy demeans others. When it is exposed, it destroys trust. (All I'm trying to do is raise a little awareness here.) The third damaging thing it does is it *degrades the message*. This is Paul's point, so let's read this. Verse 23: "**You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'**" He's like, "It's your fault, hypocrites, that they hate God." Wow! That's strong language. But that's what he says.

Hypocrisy degrades the message. This is obvious. If I preach "No sweets" to my kids, but then I hide in the pantry and eat their candy, that kind of degrades my message. Sometimes the stakes are higher. At one end of the spectrum, you have dads eating Twix in the pantry; at the other end of the spectrum, you have Ravi Zacharias leading

countless people to faith in Christ over a lifetime of global ministry, and then it comes out at the end that, for decades, he was simultaneously sexually abusing women.

When *that* comes out... I mean, when *that* message gets degraded, people's faith in God falls apart. But hypocrisy is on a spectrum. You have everything in between. I want to make a distinction that I haven't made up to this point. Paul is not talking about hypocrisy in regard to social media or parenting styles or any of this. The principles still apply, so I thought it relevant to talk about it.

Paul is specifically talking about moral hypocrisy when it comes to the third *C*, the code of Scripture. He's saying, "Hey, guys. You don't even follow the law that you say you love." That's verse 23. Then in verse 24, he's saying, "Therefore, your God is being blasphemed because of you." A watching world can see right through it. It's like, "You're ridiculous, and your God is ridiculous."

If we're honest... You know, often to lower degrees, but we can be guilty of this too. It can look a lot of different ways. Maybe like *this*. Maybe, for you, you're airtight with your Christian sexual ethic. You believe the right thing. You're right. And you're doing the right thing. You're right. But then you turn around and are as greedy as can be and materialistic and don't have an impulse of love for neighbors in need. The watching world is like, "Dude, ridiculous, and your God is ridiculous." This is Paul's point.

That's because sometimes we're leading with the wrong message. Sometimes we lead with the law. What even is Christianity? Can we just talk about this for a second? What is Christianity? What's the Christian message? Here's Christianity: "I'm a moral disaster. Not you people out *there*, but me right *here*. I'm a disaster, and I need a savior, and I have one. Thank God I have one." Now, a watching world might still have a problem with that message, but if we lead with our need, at least our hypocrisy won't be their hang-up anymore.

Paul is being a little tough on the religious spirit. Honestly, he's going to keep going. When you first read this, you're like, "Paul, relax, man." I'm saying it reading this. Not just my sermon. When you just read the words. He's being so direct. With religious people sometimes... I think he's being so direct because they don't get it. It's like they have this false sense of security. They think their religion can save them. Paul is like, "Hey, guys. Wake up. Your religion cannot save you."

I don't think we understand... Or maybe we do. But let me help us understand the religious context Paul was talking into here. A little 30-second Jewish cultural history lesson about the religious spirit. Two thousand years ago, in Jewish culture, toddlers would be memorizing the Shema. That's "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is

one. You shall love the Lord..." *That* thing, memorized. Toddlers. It was normal in the culture.

Then 5-year-olds would be memorizing the Hallel Psalms. That's six chapters of the Bible, Psalm 113 to Psalm 118...5-year-olds memorizing. Normal in that culture. Then the 6-year-old boys would go to synagogue to learn to read and write, with the Bible as their textbook. Many of those boys had the Torah memorized at 10. That's the first five books of the Bible memorized at 10.

I mean, have you ever read Numbers before? Memorized at 10 years old? I asked ChatGPT, "How long would it take somebody to say the Torah?" Fifteen hours. Memorized by 10-year-olds. It's like, the Law. They were so religiously self-disciplined; therefore, they felt morally superior. They had this false sense of security based on their religious self-discipline. But it wasn't just this self-discipline. They had a religious symbol that made them feel secure too. Paul talks about it. Let's read this. Verse 25:

"For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical."

They had the right religious symbol...circumcision. This was the sign of the covenant for the Jews, the sign that God had chosen them. They felt secure based on this symbol. Paul is using more words than *I'm* going to use to basically say, "It's just a symbol." A symbol is no good if there's no substance. What does the symbol indicate?

It's like a wedding ring. If I wear a wedding ring, and I'm not married, who cares? It's just a symbol. It's ridiculous. It's not neutral; it's negative. It's a lie. But he uses the converse too. If I *am* married and in a committed relationship to a spouse and *don't* wear a ring... Well, it's kind of weird to not have the symbol, but you're married. Okay. Makes sense.

Now, here's the question for us: When it comes to your Christianity, are there places where you place confidence in symbols over substance? There are all of these modern Christian symbols. Let me start with the most biblical one, obviously...baptism. We like baptism around here. Here's a question: Does the symbol of baptism mean you are a Christian? I hope so, but only you know. Baptism is a great sign for salvation, but it's not the source of salvation.

This is actually the problem with infant baptism. That is a sign of the substance of the parents' faith, not of the baby's faith. There are a lot of people walking around who were baptized as infants; therefore, they think, based solely on that event, that they are Christians. For them, to use Paul's language, the baptism has become un-baptism. It's actually a lie. It actually provides a false sense of security.

It's not just baptism. In our modern church culture, there are all kinds of other things that people could rely on. Listen. This is important. We have to ask ourselves this question if we're responsible people. Do you have a false sense of security? I'm not trying to make anybody paranoid, but it's a relevant question.

Do you rely on any of these *signs* of salvation as your *source* of salvation? There are so many signs in modern church culture. It's like, "Well, I grew up in the church and have been going to church all my life. I was a leader in my youth group. I serve. I go to Community Group. I'm consistent. I contribute. I lead my Community Group."

Am I suggesting that it's possible for a Community Group leader to not be a Christian? I don't think that's very likely, but it *is* possible. I'm just saying don't sit there and think this part isn't for you because of your résumé of church activities. I mean, Paul is writing to somebody. These people exist. Your résumé doesn't exceed the Jews he's writing to here.

It's like this, to go back to the analogy. For some of you guys, we all see the wedding ring. We see the signs. You have a lot of signs. We saw you moved to the suburbs and bought a bigger house. We all see two cars in the driveway. If we're really paying attention, you even file your taxes "married filing jointly," but you keep the blinds closed because you're living in the house by yourself. There's no one else in there. It's just you in there.

There are a lot of signs and symbols out *here*, but it's just you in there. It's lonely in there, man. Religious people are lonely. It's a lot of effort, a lot of show, a lot of just you in there. Guys, look. Signs don't make you married; a spouse makes you married. In the same way, signs don't make you a Christian; a savior makes you a Christian.

This is going to sound intense and, honestly, it kind of *is*, but here it is. I want everybody who calls Two Cities Church home to know where they stand with God. I don't want anybody with a false sense of security. If you're just here, checking things out, we're so glad you're here. We want to walk with you, talk with you, and have honest, open conversations with you. It's great. That's fine.

Young people in particular, can I talk to you for a second? Oh my goodness. You don't need to feel like you need to trick your mom or dad or your youth leaders or yourself into some sort of false sense of security. Like, "Oh, Mom will be really proud of me if I

just..." No. It's just not helpful. Don't do that. You don't need to do that. It's okay. We love you. We're praying that God will reveal himself to you in his time.

Have you ever seen somebody with a false sense of security before? It's honestly hard to watch. It's like, you know, but they don't. It makes me think of those old *American Idol* auditions. Do you guys remember those? I'm not talking about today's auditions. If you can remember... This was like high school for me. I'm talking about the 20-year-old clips.

Before the producers weeded out all of the train wrecks, you'd get this 16-year-old kid, who legitimately thinks he's a great singer because Mom thinks he's great. He's all pumped up. "Let's go audition and be on *American Idol*." He's waiting in line for 20 hours. He's all excited. Then he walks into a room to audition in front of Simon Cowell, where the standard is different. Simon's standard isn't "Mom thinks you're cute"; Simon is looking for Kelly Clarkson. It doesn't go great. It's brutal to watch.

Look. There are obvious ways in which God is different than Simon Cowell, but he does have a high standard. I mean, he's the eternal God. Is he not allowed to have a high standard? He does. Let's not get it twisted. He has written that standard on our consciences. Everybody has access to this. For all of us, he has written it in the code of Scripture. If we're honest... Paul has been driving toward this verdict the whole time. If we're honest, the verdict for all of us is "Guilty."

All right. Let's pray and go home. No, I'm just kidding. What a giant bummer. Right? This sermon is the worst. It's ridiculous. Is there any good news? Is it just a bunch of guilty people? Well, you have to keep coming back. We're going through Romans this whole year. Keep coming back. But shame on me if I preach once every six months and don't preach the gospel to you guys. Yes, there's another group of people: redeemed people.

Okay. We're trying to land the plane here. Let me try to simplify this for us a little bit as we close. Good people don't go to heaven because they don't exist. Do you hear that, religious people? Good people don't go to heaven because they don't exist. No one meets the standard.

Bad people, the rest of us, don't go to heaven because we're bad. This is obvious. Go home and ask your little kids when you get home. It's innate. "Hey, kids. Do bad guys go to heaven?" They're going to know the answer. They're going to be like, "Nah. I think they've got standards in that place. I don't think they do."

So, who goes to heaven? Redeemed people. Forgiven people. Achievers don't; believers do. God will not be repaid. We need to be remade. This is how salvation

works. All right. We need to respond together, but we're going to read one more verse, and it's going to frame up the way we're going to respond together.

Verse 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."*** What matters is on the inside. It's a matter of the heart. Christianity is inside out, not outside in. New fruit doesn't make a new tree; a new tree produces new fruit. What matters is on the inside. This is the place where only God sees.

Do you see how that verse ends? It says, ***"His praise is not from man but from God."*** This is the place where it only matters what God thinks. Man looks on the outward appearance. He sees all of the symbols on the outside, but he can't see through the blinds. Only God knows what's going on inside the house. We're not talking about man's verdict today. Who cares? We're talking about God's verdict. In the end, this is all that matters.

So, we need to respond. We're going to respond together. As we do so, I just want to ask you guys to try to do something for me if you can. Not for me. Do it for you. Try to just be honest with yourself and not think about what other people think of you. It doesn't matter what your Christian image is. That doesn't matter. That's not what we're talking about. The opposite of hypocrisy is honesty. This is a moment for you to be honest with the God who made you. This is a moment for your heart and the God who made you.

All right. If everything we talked about today is true, we have to ask ourselves a question. If there's an eternal God who has high standards, and he's going to bring a verdict on your life in the end, and if we're responsible people, we need to ask a question. Here it is: In the end, what are you relying on to stand before him?

I don't know how this works exactly, but let's say you get to the gates of eternity and there's an angel standing there, and he's like, "Hey, we have standards in here, and I'm just curious why you belong in here." What are you going to say? Are you going to talk about how generous you've been? Is your plan to talk about your résumé of Christian activities?

Are you going to talk about how you perceive yourself as better than some other people who you perceive as worse than you? "Oh, I've been a pretty good person, Mister Angel." Based on what? Going all the way back to the beginning... Based on what? Guys, your goodness is not it. If your plan is to rely on your performance against his perfect standard... Oh, this is anxiety provoking.

There's a better answer. Instead of "I've been a pretty good person," the ironically better answer is something like, "Mister Angel, I've been a pretty terrible person, and

you definitely shouldn't let me in based on the things I've done. But don't ask *me* if I belong. Go ask the King sitting on his throne over there, because I know him.

He's my Savior. He's my Lord. He's my shepherd. He put my sin on his back and died in my place and rose up resurrected to that throne over there. I know him. Go ask him. He told me he has a book with names, and he was going to write mine in there. I don't hold the keys to this place, but *he* does. He said he was coming here to prepare a place for me, and if I know anything, I know he's not a liar. So go ask him."

That's confidence, friends. That is confidence based on the authority of Scripture. Not on our effort in keeping the law in Scripture but on his effort in keeping his promises. It's confidence. For many of you, this *is* your confidence, but for some of you, it is not currently your confidence. But it *can* be.

Before you walk out of this place, you can change the location of your confidence from *your* effort to *his*, from *your* righteousness to *his*. You can either plan to advocate for yourself or have the Great High Priest advocate for you. What a gift. Would you all bow your heads and close your eyes with me? A moment for your heart and the God who made it.

That King sitting on his throne has his hands open with that gift to each and every person who would believe in him. You don't take the gift by working really hard and earning money and buying it. You open your hands up. That's all you do. You just open your hands up and say, "I'll take it." Then he puts it in your hands, and that's it.

If you would like to receive that gift, I'm going to give you an opportunity to do so right now. I'm not trying to manipulate anybody. If you don't want to do this, don't do this. But if you do, if you're tired and you want to receive the gift of the grace of Jesus Christ, you can just pray something in your heart like this after me.

"Lord Jesus Christ, I will not be able to save myself in the end, but I trust that you can. In faith, I just believe that you've done everything necessary to save me, that your death on the cross counts for me. You've done everything necessary. Be my Savior and be my Lord.

I'm willing to follow you wherever you ask me to go, whatever you ask me to do. I'm saying the vow, so to speak. I'm having the wedding in my heart. Be my Lord. I'm committing myself to you. I'm trading all that I've been doing, which hasn't been working, for all that is better, for your everlasting, abundant life."

If you just prayed something like that... It's not about what people think, but I'm happy for you, because you just opened the best gift in the world. I've found it true in my life. Nothing life will ever throw at you is going to be too hard for you. God will get

you through it. The God who made the world and has your story written from beginning to end is with you every day until he takes you home. Nothing can snatch you out of his hand. Praise Jesus.

We're going to have some time to respond. If you want to come down and pray about any number of the things we've talked about, you can. If you prayed to receive Christ, we'll have people you can talk to. You need to talk to somebody. Talk with somebody you came with if you did that.

The altar is for anybody who wants to come and continue the conversation with God about any of these things we've talked about...how you've been afflicting your conscience, if you want to talk to him about that; how someone you love has been. The altar is open. You can come and continue the conversation about any of these things. I'm going to pray, and then we'll respond in prayer and singing together.

Jesus Christ, we need you. You have high standards, and the only way *to* you is *through* you. We need you, and we have you, so we love you. We pray this in your name, King Jesus, amen.