

IF THE SHOE FITS ... WEAR IT
ROMANS 2:17-3:8

By Pastor John Carlini, D.Mn

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I would like for you to catch a feel for what the Apostle Paul is doing in this portion of Scripture. I think we could have more easily identified with it 40 or 50 years ago. Keep in mind that Paul is addressing the Christian congregation in Rome, made up of all sorts of people who have come from a wide range of backgrounds. His sole intent from Chapter 1, verse 18 through Chapter 3, verse 20 is to demonstrate that every human being stands guilty before God, with no hope of salvation outside of the blood shed of Jesus Christ. Paul started with people who their group would recognize as totally morally bankrupt. They would be sexual perverts, thieves, murderers, child molesters, terrorists, etc. When Paul talked about the power of the Gospel for salvation, they no doubt all cheered. As the church read this portion of the letter, the people who were saved out of this type of lifestyle perhaps sat down and became reflective of what God had saved them from.

Next, when they read about the next portion of the letter, condemning the self-righteousness of good people, and how God saved them from that type of self-deluded lifestyle, even more people sat down and become reflective of what God saved them from.

The only ones left standing were the religious people, in the church at Rome, the Jewish converts to Christianity, you see they were raised to obey the religious laws so most of them felt they were perhaps good to go from the start.

Here is where it will be hard for us to identify a group of people in the modern day church. About 40 years ago, there was a clear distinction between the church and the rest of culture. Just as I have preached through the first two groups of people, the sad thing is that most of us would have to identify with them.

But in Paul's day, the Jews certainly held themselves to a higher moral standard than did the rest of the whole world. They kept all sorts of religious laws and prided themselves as not being idolaters or sexually immoral, they had a real air of moral superiority about them.

But Paul is going to point out that being religious is not the way to salvation either, good religious people are lost as well in fact, they may be in more danger because they have learned to trust in religious language, religious ceremonies, and religious duties to save them when in fact, all of us are saved the same way. Religious people must also leave whatever they have been depending on for salvation behind, and learn to depend solely on their faith in Jesus Christ. I think this should concern us as people who think we are Christians, because sometimes I think we get caught up in thinking we are good and somehow have come to deserve heaven.

Paul's message throughout this section is, if you think you are better than someone else is, then for sure you are not. This morning is a real gut check for those of us who are church people. I don't have any numbers or data, but my guess is that out of all the people, who claim we are Christian, probably most of us are not. We'll only know when the chips are down.

I got a real eye opener in the church I used to pastor, you know, the one that was so tough. Let me tell you these were really religious people. One year we decided to have Lenten Services, so we started on the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, that day is called Fat Tuesday, or more commonly, Marti Gras. Well, people all over town were partying and drinking and getting crazy but we were having a prayer meeting in church. Then there was a thunderstorm that was so fierce it knocked out all the power, but that was no problem, we merely lit the candles and went on with the meeting.

However, one guy on the street, dressed as the devil, had much too much to drink when he wandered in the church, drunk, soaked, disoriented, and stunned. When the choir saw the

devil stumbling in, they ran, when the deacons saw the devil, they ran, when the congregation saw the devil, most of them ran. ... except for one poor little old lady. In her panic, she caught her dress in the hymnal rack and was stuck. As the drunken devil started stumbling towards her, she looked at me, then to him and started to scream out and plead to the devil, "Please don't hurt me. I've been coming here listening to him every week, but believe me, ... I've been on your side the whole time."

I'm sure that would never happen here. Right ...

I think that the problem most of us religious people face is becoming self-righteous. We start to think that we are pretty good people, especially when we compare ourselves to others. The problem is, that we come to think we are good, but then the reality is we are probably lost and headed for hell. But here is the point, especially for those of us who are regular churchgoers; **there is really no excuse for those of us who attend church regularly to be lost and condemned to hell.** Think about it. We have God's word, the Bible and every week we read it, teach it, preach it, and hopefully study it. God reveals Himself to us in the Bible, God reveals the truth about who we are in Bible, and God reveals to us what salvation is in the Bible.

In addition to the Bible we have ceremonies that are meant to remind us where we have come from, and where we are going. Our church practices the two ordinances, which some churches call the sacraments of baptism and communion. These, along with other worship services are meant to remind us of who we are in Christ.

With all this help, we may be surprised to hear that we are in as bad of shape as the child molesters and drug dealers. That's pretty hard to swallow, but let's see the Apostle Paul make his case.

I. WE SHOULD KNOW BETTER (Vs. 17-24)

In verses 17-24, he tells us that we should know better; **the Bible gives us all the information we need to know God and how to live in a way that will please Him.**

Paul is going to use this literary tool we talked about last week, a diatribe. Paul is going to play both, a challenger and a responder. If you are familiar with the life of Paul, you will recognize that he is very familiar with this imaginary opponent, in fact it could be the pre-conversion Paul arguing with the now Christian Paul. Paul came from a proud Jewish heritage and the Jews as a people prided themselves on their lofty moral lifestyles, and rightly so, because compared with the rest of humanity, they did live ethical lifestyles.

The designator Jew comes from a proud line, focusing on Messiah. The deliverer of Israel was supposed to come from the family of David, from the tribe of Judah, and Jesus came from the family of David, from the tribe of Judah. After the exile, the Israelites came to refer to themselves as Jews, politically, culturally, and religiously.

Paul is now going to use an, if then, argument. The if is covered in verses 17-20, followed by the then portion in verses 21-23, finishing with a strong therefore, in verse 24.

A. GIFTED STATUS (Vs. 17-20)

In verses 17-20, Paul describes the gifted status of the Jewish people. He describes them as people of the book and people who stand in a special relationship with God. In other words, the Jews are the chosen people of God and out of all the people in the world God chose to reveal Himself to the nation of Israel. He chose Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob their purpose was to be ambassadors to the world. God was going to reveal Himself to the world through the Jewish nation.

Paul says that the Jews considered themselves to have a special identity and God had chosen them, He had called Himself their God and called them His people.

Secondly, God gave them a special security He gave them the scriptures and in the Scriptures, God told them how they could receive His blessings and how they could remain safe. If they obeyed the commands God gave them, they would remain safe and secure. And finally, as a result of this special identity and special security, God gave them a special purpose. They were to evangelize the world. In other words, they were to help people find God.

At this point, I would like to remind us how much that sounds like our identity, security, and purpose as Christians. When we received Christ in faith, God gave us a special identity we became children of God. Our security is spelled out for us in the Bible. God gave us the Bible so that if we obey His commands, we will be safe and secure.

Finally our purpose is to be salt and light to a hurting world for people are hurting, frustrated, afraid, and angry. The message we have received, the gospel, the good news is that Jesus wants to rescue them, heal them, and give them abundant life. We have been given the privilege of being ambassadors of that Good News.

But look at the problem here, they started to brag about their special status with God and they then took on an elitist attitude and they somehow came to think they deserved this special status.

Sometimes I listen to Christians and cringe they are critical, and think they are better than others. We should do well to remember that God told the Israelites that He didn't choose them because they were so powerful or so holy He chose them because they were the smallest and weakest, in order that He might demonstrate to the world how powerful He was.

We should always remember where we came from. God didn't save us because we were better than anyone else He chose us because we were the most pathetic, so that He could demonstrate His power by showing how together He could recreate pathetic people.

B. ABUSIVE STATUS (Vs. 21-23)

Gifted and powerful people must always be on guard not to get carried away with their own press. Verses 21-23 describe how a gifted status can turn into an abusive status where Paul says that indeed we have been given the Bible and a special standing with God, however, if that's the case, then why don't we live up to it. If we are able to criticize others, give them advice and presume to teach them, then why is it that we don't teach ourselves and get our own lives together?

We know enough to teach people, "Thou shalt not steal:" but how honest are we in our everyday lives? Maybe we don't go into a bank and steal money, but how honestly do we represent ourselves? Do we pretend to be better or smarter than we really are? Do we cheat at our jobs or on our assignments? Do we pad our expense accounts? I'm sure if we examine ourselves, we don't need to look too far to see that we are not all that honest.

When we talk about others, gossip about others or criticize others, we are actually thieves we are stealing away others' dignity. When we lie or exaggerate the truth, we are actually stealing away reality from people.

We teach that we shouldn't commit adultery and my guess is that most of us don't commit adultery. But are our thought lives pure? Are we emotionally faithful to our wives and husbands? One of the things I tell engaged couples to leave behind are their friends of the opposite sex. Why? Because they should not be going to a member of the opposite sex for comfort, for advice or, for encouragement they need to learn to develop that type of intimacy

with their future spouse. If you are married and place your job before your spouse, if you place your family, or your recreation, or anything before your spouse, ... that's adultery. If you are looking at pornographic material, you are committing adultery. It's amazing to me, to learn, some pastors are looking at pornography on the Internet and actually think because it is in the privacy of their own room it's o.k. Let me correct that now. Internet pornography, pornography of any kind, or any Internet relationship, its still all adultery. It's interesting that what these religious people were doing in Paul's day must have been to legally define adultery as actually, physically, having sexual intercourse. Somehow they were able to justify all sorts of other sexual behavior. It's like if I can define the law precisely and narrowly, then I can do anything except that one particular act. The sad reality is that there are all sorts of sexual immorality in the western Christian church and I frankly, cannot understand how that happens.

We pride ourselves on worshipping the One True and Living God and we would certainly not worship the gods of Buddhism, Hinduism, animals, carvings, or crystals. But I think if we examined our thought lives, we would easily see that there are many things that come before God. We worship sex, money, power, success, a man or a woman. Take this little test and ask yourself, "What do I spend most of my time thinking about?" Whatever we spend the most time thinking about, that's probably our god. I know from personal experience, that oftentimes in my own life, I have made myself god. Yet we consider ourselves people of the book and we say that the Bible is God's word, yet how many times do we continue to neglect it, reject it, and disobey it? Let me give you another quick example; if you are an unhappy person to be around, ... if you are a critical person, an angry person, a judgmental person, ... please ... don't tell anyone you are a Christian. If your life does not manifest the fruit of the Spirit, don't tell anyone you're a Christian.

Listen, when we are not humble, loving, and gentle then we are poor advertisements for God. Think about it this way when people see me, and the way I act, is that an accurate picture of God living in me? If not, then what good is it to be given a gifted status? I am just abusing it.

C. LOST STATUS (V. 24)

Verse 24 describes a lost status. If I am out there claiming to be a Christian, and living a hypocritical life, then what I am really doing is dragging God's name and reputation through the mud. People will say, "If that's what it means to be a Christian, ... then I want no part of or if that's the kind of God you serve, ... then I want no part of Him either."

Now in the history of Israel, I want to put another little twist on this verse. In ancient days, nations believed if they were conquered by another nation, then their gods were stronger than their own. When Israel become sexually immoral, when they worshipped idols, and forgot all about social justice, God punished them by allowing foreign nations to conquer them and destroy the temple in Jerusalem, now naturally, when other nations saw this, they considered the God of the Jews to be no God at all.

When we choose to live immoral lifestyles, when we worship the idols of our culture, when we ignore social justice, we make Jesus look bad.

I want all of us to think about this one fact; as I read through the gospels, I only see Jesus lose it and go nuts on one group of people, not the prostitutes, not the thieves, not the pagans, but with religious hypocrites. When Jesus sees people pretending to be religious, but actually living differently, it just pushes Him over the edge.

A good dose of humility and honest reflection will keep us from becoming hypocrites. So the moral of this first section is that because we have the Bible and believe in the Bible doesn't guarantee anything we need to commit ourselves to knowing what's in it, and humbly

submitting to its teachings. **The Bible gives us all the information we need to know God and how to live in a way that will please Him.** There is no excuse for us since we all have Bibles. I have committed myself to preaching through it week after week, we should know what's right and what's wrong. We should know better!

II. WE SHOULD LIVE BETTER (Vs. 25-29)

In verses 25-29, Paul reminds us that as church people, we ought to live better; **doing religious stuff and participating in religious ceremonies doesn't save us either**, still some people think doing religious stuff makes us holy.

A. CHANGED BEHAVIOR (Vs. 25-27)

Verses 25-27 demonstrate clearly that God is looking for changed behavior. Now the Jews of Jesus' day had come to equate circumcision with salvation, if you were circumcised in a Jewish ceremony, then you were Jew, and if you were a Jew, you were saved. Jesus made it clear that was a lie and the apostle here makes it clear that kind of thinking is delusional.

Think about this. There are Christians who actually think baptism makes them a Christian, and that taking communion makes them Christians or gives them added power. Listen now I don't mean to be sacrilegious but let me show you how misguided this thinking is. We could circumcise a dog in a ceremony, but that doesn't make the dog a Jew. We could baptize a monkey or give communion to the monkey that doesn't make the monkey a Christian.

We could give dogs and monkeys membership to our church, but that doesn't make them Christians. I hope we get this because Paul wants us to understand that just because a person was circumcised, he wasn't a Jew, ... nor did circumcision guarantee that neither he was in a right relationship with God, ... nor did it guarantee his salvation in fact, probably most of the circumcised people were going to hell.

Let's carry that on over into the life of the church, especially because those who defend infant baptism equate it with circumcision. People have come to think that because they were baptized, or because they take communion, or just because they are members of the church, something magical has happened. The Jews believed that in the time of Messiah, they would be rulers and judges of the universe. We as Christians believe that in the end times, we will rule the earth with Christ.

If we place our trust in religious ceremonies, in membership, and in doing religious stuff in church, then the fact is we are sadly mistaken about our salvation. The point Paul is making here is not that circumcision, baptism, or church stuff is bad just as he is not saying that people outside the church will be saved by doing good things and living authentically, good lives.

He is saying that those things don't save us. If we circumcise a baby, or baptize a baby thinking that is salvation, then we are mistaken. If we are baptized and take communion, thinking that will save us, then we are superstitious, not Christian. Paul's point is that these outward signs ought to be a symbol, a declaration, of what we have committed ourselves to in faith.

Paul wants to hammer home the futility of thinking we deserve salvation because we have punched all the religious tickets. What is really important?

B. CHANGED ATTITUDES (Vs. 28-29)

Humble faith in God is the only thing that matters. God is looking for changed attitudes as described in verses 28-29. He's not looking for religious behavior. For example, the act of baptism means nothing, ... unless it is accompanied by a real inner change. The symbolism of baptism is that when I go under the water, I am dying to my old, sinful, self-centered way of life

I am dying to self. But when I come up out of the water, I am coming up to new life in Christ and I have been cleansed of my sins, and now I will live a life in humble submission to Christ.

Now I can be baptized one time, ... or a hundred times. But unless I have received Jesus in faith, ... unless I submit to Him as Lord and Savior, baptism doesn't mean a thing. Here Paul says cutting some dead skin away from a man's penis doesn't make him a child of God. It is cutting the dead, self-centered attitudes from our hearts that put us in a right relationship with God. So when we take communion and participate in baptism, we must constantly ask ourselves if partaking in these symbols are an accurate reflection of what God is doing in our hearts.

Secondly, we need the attitude of love. I think all of us can devise some sort of Legal interpretation of false Christianity and then live up to it. We can say, drinking is wrong, smoking is wrong, whatever, you name it, then we can live up to these interpretations and condemn everyone else who doesn't. Our attitude becomes how much can I do, ... how close can I come to the line without ever crossing it? That is being fleshly and living according to the letter of the law. However, Jesus raised the bar by giving us the commandment to love, ... to love Him and to love one another. If I took the attitude of, I'm going to go to nudie bars, and all the stuff that goes on in those places, ... but I'm not going to commit adultery by having sex with anyone, ... maybe I haven't technically committed adultery, ... but would those actions demonstrate that I love my wife? I don't think so. If I love my neighbor, I certainly don't have to worry about stealing from them, killing them, or exploiting them sexually in any way. No, if I love my neighbor, I will continue to think about how I can encourage them towards their relationship in God. If I love God, I will be looking for ways to please Him, not simply and legalistically looking for loopholes so that I will not break a rule.

And finally, if we have indeed had a true change of heart and attitude, we will be looking to receive praise from God and not other people. Pride and arrogance desire the approval of people whereas humility, submissiveness and love die for the praise of God alone. True believers will live better because their lives are under the control of God's Holy Spirit. Religious people will have all sorts of rules, regulations, and opinions, but no real change of behavior or attitude. So the point, once again, is this; **doing religious stuff and participating in religious ceremonies doesn't save us either.** Just because we have the Bible, or because we come to church, do religious stuff, and try to be good, doesn't guarantee that we are saved. **It is only coming to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ through faith that gives us the power to know and to live better lives.**

III. WE SHOULD KNOW BETTER AND LIVE BETTER (Vs. 1-8)

All through this section, Paul's intent is to demonstrate that without Jesus everybody is lost. We are all in the same boat it doesn't matter whether I came out of a very moral, religious background, or whether I came out of a drug-dealing background. I face the same ultimate destiny I am lost, without hope, headed for an eternity in hell. It is only when we surrender to Christ in faith that we can be saved. Faith in Jesus Christ is the only thing that can change our eternal destinies from death to life.

A. KNOWING BETTER (Vs.1-4)

Verses 1-4 remind us that we should know better. Paul's intent was to demonstrate that all of us are sinners and in need of Jesus' salvation. So it appears that he may be saying, "It is of no benefit being a Jew," or for us who are raised in the church. But Paul quickly adds, "on the contrary, we who are in church have every advantage." The Jew had special advantages gentiles had only general revelation. They could only know as much about God as they could learn in

nature and by what they could learn about Him through creation. However, the Jews had special revelation. They had God manifest Himself to them throughout their history, He appeared in the pillar of fire and cloud, He appeared in the form of angels and He spoke to them through prophets. They had the promise of the Messiah, they had the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament add to that special revelation, Jesus in the flesh, and we can see that they had a distinct advantage.

We as church people have the whole salvation history recorded for us in the Holy Spirit inspired Bible. If anyone ought to know accurately who God is and what He expects of us, we should. It simply takes a commitment to read, study, and to memorize the Bible. People who come to churches that preach and teach the Bible have a clear advantage over those who have never heard the Bible preached or taught. The sad thing is that people come to church, participate in worship, are baptized and take communion, may be lost because it is all about faith in Christ, not acting religious.

Paul goes on in verse to prove his point. Just because the Jews acted unfaithfully, does that mean then that God is not faithful? The answer is no. The Jewish nation proved over and over that even though they were unfaithful from the building of the Golden Calves from the beginning, to idolatry, immorality, and a rejection of Jesus, God would always preserve a remnant. God promised that the Jews would be a blessing to every tribe and nation He fulfilled that salvation promise through Jesus.

Let's keep in mind that it is God who defines the community of faith it is not the community that defines God. God's faithfulness consists of both His judgment and His mercy. If God would have acted out on pure justice, judgment without mercy, there would have been no more Jewish nation, and no more Jewish religion the promise of Messiah would never come to

fruition. Take for example King David the promised Messiah was to come through David. When David committed adultery with Bathsheba, and had her husband killed, the strict Jewish law demanded death there could be no substitute. Death was the sentence but God had mercy on David and on Israel and spared his life because of His mercy.

On the other hand, mercy without judgment leads to a lack of righteousness. Without judgment all sin would be acceptable. However, God continues to approach His people with both justice and mercy. That's why Paul quotes this portion of David's repentance Psalm in verse 4.

We as Christians must always keep this in mind because we have the Bible, and we should know better we should have a very balanced view of God.

B. LIVING BETTER (Vs. 5-8)

Verses 5-8 remind us to live better. I have actually heard people use these next arguments that Paul refutes.

1. GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS (Vs. 5-6)

In verses 5-6, Paul points to God's righteousness. These people argue, well Paul, since my sin gives God a chance to demonstrate His judgment and mercy at work, ... if my sinful behavior is used as a tool by God in which He shows how righteous He is, then why does God judge me? In fact, He should reward me. Let me highlight what I said before. If God lets sin go unpunished, then He would be unjust, and if He is unjust then He is not qualified to judge the world fairly. You see, sometimes we presume too much on God's patience and His mercy. There is no excuse for us to go on sinning God approaches us with faithfulness, love and justice. God is righteous.

2. GOD'S TRUTHFULNESS (V. 7)

In verse 7, we are reminded of God's truthfulness. Again, these people might say, well if I didn't lie, then we wouldn't have anything to highlight God's truthfulness. In other words, by looking at how sinful I am, one could easily see how holy God is and if that's the case, then God should reward me. The more I lie, the more truthful God looks. The more immoral I am, the more pure God looks. The more unholy I am, the more holy God looks.

3. OUR LACK OF BOTH (V. 8)

Verse 8 comes to the conclusion that we lack both God's righteousness and His truthfulness. I know people who just don't understand salvation, even though they claim to be Christians. They say something like, "So you're saying if I accept Christ, it doesn't matter what I do I will be saved." In that question, they are looking for a legal loophole. Some were saying that Paul taught you could continue to live sinful, immoral, hateful lives and be saved they would say, "Let's sin more so God can demonstrate His love more." I'm thinking, is not sinning enough of a problem? Do we have to go out of our way to try and sin? I'm thinking that's not a problem in my life.

But let's get back to these people's question. If I'm saved, can I do anything I want and still be saved? Watch this. If I am truly saved, what I will want to do is to serve God and obey His commands. So yes, I should do what I want I should go ahead and love God, serve God and obey God. I won't be looking for legal loopholes. But if I am just a church person or religious person, and not really saved, then I may want to please myself rather than please God then that person is not really saved.

We'll find out next week, that Paul has laid out the bad news, and there are none among us who can stand up and point the finger at anyone else. We are all sinners, condemned to spend eternity in hell. We are all rescued in the same way and that way is; **only by coming to a**

personal relationship with Jesus Christ through faith that gives us the power to know and to live better lives.

But the sad reality is that there are people who were raised in Christian homes, and people who attend church and do all sorts of religious stuff, ... that are not saved, in fact they are lost and headed for hell, **and there is no excuse for those of us who attend church regularly to be lost and condemned to hell.**

I think it's interesting that Jesus really goes crazy when he meets up with religious hypocrites. Why? Because not only do they destroy their own reputations, they destroy the church's reputation, and they make God look bad.

If you're a religious person, who is not truly saved, listen to this story by Stuart Briscoe.

“When I was in business, I was placed in a position where I had to deal with a man who had embezzled a considerable sum of money from the bank for which we both worked. The reason for his embezzlement was that he had two wives and families and was trying to run two homes. When he was apprehended and dismissed from the company, he stunned everyone in the room by saying, ‘I am very sorry for what I have done and I need to know whether I should fulfill my preaching commitments on Sunday in our local church!’ As a practicing Christian, I spent a considerable amount of my time in the ensuing weeks undoing the damage done by this man’s blatant inconsistency. To my chagrin, I discovered that my colleagues not only despised the man in question but because of his behavior were quick to dismiss the church he belonged to as a ‘bunch of hypocrites,’ the gospel he professed to believe as a ‘lot of hogwash,’ and the God he claimed to serve as ‘nonexistent.’”

Paul's explanation of the Jewish position clearly outlined three dangers that confront all religious people. First, the danger of failing to live according to knowledge and profession; second, the danger of being responsible for unbelievers being misled and confused by inconsistent behavior; and third, the danger of God's name being despised because of this confusion.