

A Privileged People

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on July 18, 2021.

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—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? 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.” 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. 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. Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God (Romans 2:17–3:2).¹

At the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry, the religious right were in control. The Pharisees successfully led a reunion of God and country, religion and culture fused into law-observing nationalism. This had not always been the case.

Israel’s history was full of examples when everyone did what was right in their own eyes (Judges 17:6), when of more kings than naught it could be said, “he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD” (2 Kings 21:2), or “He abandoned the LORD, the God of his fathers, and did not walk in the way of the LORD” (2 Kings 21:22). There was a time when God’s written law was not only forgotten but lost. There are more examples of Israel’s unfaithfulness than faithfulness. So, the Pharisee-led agenda to rid the nation of pagan influence and a return to orthodoxy was a welcomed revival.

Despite their subjection to Roman rule, Israel was given religious autonomy, leading to the restoration of temple worship, the liturgical calendar, and pervasive influence upon the family and synagogue. Yet, in their religious and cultural revival there were inherent dangers, notably legalism and hypocrisy. There were also Pharisaical perspectives that made Jesus and his gospel not only unwelcomed but repugnant. It is the religious irony of ironies: The religious right went wrong because their reformation didn’t need a Savior or his gospel, revealing a jaded perspective of their privilege, a blinding pretense, and a misguided presumption. They were a people of whom the prophet wrote, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

Privilege

The first record of the written Word of God is when God wrote with his finger upon the stone tablets (Ex. 31:18), but this was not the only time. Through Moses, Israel received the first five books, or Pentateuch, but God's special revelation to Israel didn't stop there. They also received the books of history, wisdom, and the prophets. And unlike the pagan nations, Israel could be certain that what they received was not the result of "human impulse; rather, men carried along by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet. 1:21 NET). As a people, the Jews were the privileged recipients (and trustees) of the oracles of God.

They were also God's covenant people, established through Abraham, and recipients of the covenantal sign and seal of circumcision. Such divine favor was reiterated in the Mosaic covenant, revealing God's good pleasure upon a privileged people. And by virtue of God's favor, God chose to make Israel "as a light for the nations" (Isa. 49:6), that the name of God would not be blasphemed but blessed.

However, as is often the case, those born of privilege forget the faith of their fathers and presume upon inherited blessings. Rather than seeing their privilege as evidence of God's mercy and grace, rather than letting God's kindness lead them to repentance, they kept up the pretense of their religion, missing the gospel.

Pretense

If anyone knew the Jewish mindset it was Paul, formerly Saul of Tarsus. He was "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless" (Phil. 3:5-6). He knows the demands of Jewish legalism. He had lived it. He also knows their pretension, revealed in four charges: First, "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," why do you not obey it? Second, "if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness," why can you not see? As the guide of the blind, are you blind too? Third, if you are "an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth," why do you not teach yourself? Fourth, to summarize: If you preach God's law, why do you break it?

In considering these charges, would any Jew claim that the problem is actually with the law of God? Would they say that God's righteous standard is too righteous, his perfect rule too perfect, his holy Word too holy? No, no one would say that, as it is "the embodiment of knowledge and truth."

No, the problem was their pretense—they boasted in the law but broke it; they honored God with their words but dishonored him in their deeds. For example, consider the Eighth Commandment, "You shall not steal" (Ex. 20:15). Is it the perfect law of God? Is it true? Do you believe it? Do you believe it to be universally applicable to everyone, Jew and Gentile alike? Have you ever stolen anything? Have you ever coveted what someone else has?

What about the Seventh Commandment, “you shall not commit adultery” (Ex. 20:14). Is adultery sin? Is it always a sin for everyone in the world? Should we stand against sexual immorality? Have you ever committed adultery? What about in your heart and mind?

What about idolatry? Is it wrong to put anything before God (Ex. 20:3)? Is it a sin to worship something other than God (Ex. 20:4)? Have you ever committed this sin? Perhaps not overtly, or perhaps you lack the discernment to even see it. Perhaps you like to rename your idols with more respectable titles, like work, or patriotism, or family, or entertainment, or politics. Or, as Paul put it, “You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?” Rarely do idolaters know they are.

Wouldn't it be convenient if this were just a first-century Jewish problem? But it isn't, is it? To be clear, in Christ we are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1 Pet. 2:9), a privileged people indeed. But when we consider our privilege a badge of honor rather than a divine mercy, when we trumpet the holy standard of God's law without preaching the gospel of God's grace, we are no different than the Jew who hid his sin behind the pretense of his privileged position.

Do we print, “In God we trust,” but trust more in the ink-stained paper? Do we pledge, “One nation under God,” but worship one nation over God? Do we defend our right to worship but fail to faithfully worship every Sunday? Do we support family values forgetting that we were adopted? Do we condemn abortion but not care for the orphan? Do we denounce sexual perversion but not reveal the mystery of Christ and his bride (Eph. 5:32)? Do we judge the thief but not share our glorious riches (Phil. 4:19)? Are we lie detectors but not listening to God's truth (John 17:17)? Do we despise the covetous but not delight ourselves in the Lord (Ps. 37:4)? It's time to ask ourselves: Is the name of God blasphemed because of us?

We cannot lead unless first we follow. We cannot live unless first we die. We cannot teach obedience without forgiveness. We cannot stand for truth and justice and not point to the living Truth and proclaim that justice is satisfied. We cannot preach the law without the gospel. We cannot presume upon the riches of God's grace without the gospel of God's grace.

Presumption

Under his Covenant of Grace, God has graciously given signs to his people, sacraments visibly revealing his covenant faithfulness. John Calvin helpfully defines these as “an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels before the eyes of men.”² Sacraments are signs and seals of God's gracious favor. The problem is when the outward sign is translated from God's good will in our weakness to a guarantee of our salvation.

Paul submits the example of circumcision, the Old Covenant sign and seal of God's covenant favor, an outward sign misinterpreted by the Jews as protection against God's judgment. And yet, when we consider the historical record of Abraham, it was not circumcision that satisfied the

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 2:1172.

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righteous judgment of God but faith (Gen. 15:6). In fact, to presume that circumcision conveys righteousness is to deny the necessity of faith. The purpose of Abraham's circumcision, as Paul explains it, was to serve as a sign and seal "of the righteousness that he had by faith" (Rom. 4:11), an outward sign also to be received by his children, who by God's grace would walk in the footsteps of the faith of Abraham (Rom. 4:12). Yet, the Jews has substituted faith in God's promised provision for faith in the sacramental sign of it.

This is not solely an Old Covenant problem. Religious presumption is alive and well in the church today. Perhaps you are a student of the Bible, perhaps you know your doctrine well, but have you equated knowledge with faith. Reciting the Apostles' Creed by memory won't save you, only faith in Jesus will.

Or perhaps you identify yourself as a Christian, perhaps you are a communing member of this church, but have you merely draped yourself in an outward robe of pretense without an inward transformation of the heart? Calling yourself a Christian and joining a church won't save you, only faith in Jesus will.

Or perhaps you have received God's sign and seal upon you in the sacrament of baptism. This is indeed a blessing from God, setting you apart with the outward sign of God's Covenant of grace. But just as circumcision did not save under the Old Covenant, baptism doesn't save under the New. We are saved only by God's grace through faith in his provision of Jesus Christ our Savior.

Provision

Therefore, "a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter." Jesus, the perfect Jew, did what no one could: He perfectly obeyed and completely fulfilled the law of God, for Jew and Gentile, for sinners like you and me. And it is by his Spirit that we are born again, supernaturally given life to repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Through the Spirit-enabled circumcision of our heart we look through the trappings of religion and culture, through the idols of tradition and identity, and we find Christ and him crucified for our sin and resurrected for our life.

As a privileged people, we have been given the provision of God's Son (John 3:16). By his grace we have been given the gift of faith to believe in him. Through faith he has given us his Spirit to live without pretense or presumption as his children. As means of grace, he has given us his Word that we may know and live in truth. He has given us the sign and seal of his Covenant of Grace in baptism for us and our children. He has given us a meal of fellowship, or communion, reminding us of God's provision in Christ and nourishing us by his Spirit. He has taught us, called us, and enables us to pray to him together and individually, and he hears us as his children.

We are indeed a privileged people, who have experienced God's mercy, received God's grace. May such privilege lead us to walk humbly, to speak graciously, and to live always for God's glory. Amen.