

Sermon Growth Guide

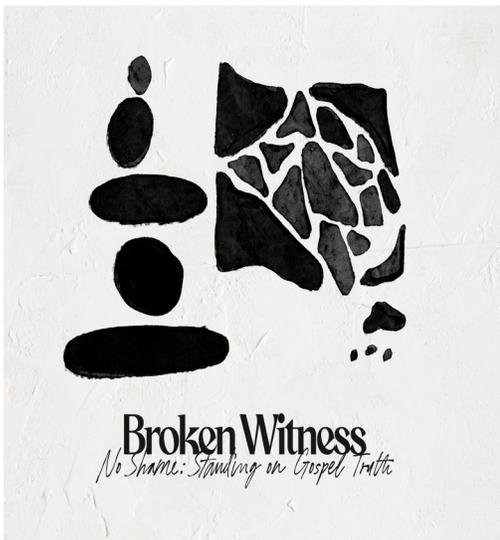
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Broken Witness | Romans 2:12-24

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Key Verse: “You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? (Romans 2:23)

Big Idea: Big Idea: The Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles were all on the same playing field. Believing in one’s superiority damages the witness of those who follow Jesus.



Foundations

Have you ever attended a church with members who taught Bible stories in the nursery and members who weren’t sure if it was David or Moses who killed Goliath? The Roman church was similar. It was comprised of Christians with vastly different histories wanting to follow Jesus.

In 2:12-17, Paul addresses both the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians. His goal is clear. Regardless of your history, we are all on the same playing field. If you are a Jewish Christian, God has given you the Law of Mount Sinai. If you are a Gentile Christian, God has written on your hearts the requirements of the law. Whether by the Law of Moses or the “unwritten law” acknowledged by the Greeks, Paul establishes that both the Jew and the Greek are unable to keep the law and therefore need the righteousness of God found in the gospel of Jesus.

Paul hones in on the Jewish Christians in verses 18-24. The Jews are the chosen people, they were given the Law, they were called into a special relationship with God. Paul’s description of the Jews as “a guide for the blind, a light for those in darkness, an instructor of the foolish” was a common belief among the Jews. In Genesis 12:2-3, God makes it clear that they are blessed to be a blessing. They saw themselves as salt in a rotting culture. How Paul’s words must have stung when he asks, “You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?”

Understanding God’s Word

Read through the passage aloud and exchange the word Jew for Christian in verse 2:17. Can you see how Paul’s accusations to the Jews in his time might apply to those of us who claim to be Christians in our time? Where in this passage do you see God’s grace? On what basis might we be a light to the world?

Applying God’s Word

We have been blessed by incredible access to God’s Word. Where might we be guilty of partaking of this blessing but ignoring the very things we are taught. Do we take God’s commands lightly because we are “saved”? Do we gossip? Sow discord? Ignore the Sabbath? Indulge in things that take our minds away from what is holy? Forget to give thanks? Covet the freedoms of others? And then, return to our Bible studies, morning devotions, Life Groups without conviction or repentance? We are called to be obedient followers of Jesus equipped by the Holy Spirit. How can we become more faithful followers?

Witnessing God’s Word

Has your heart ever been broken by a well-known Christian who is caught cheating, or lying, or stealing. The tabloids and respectable news sources are quick to seize on such stories as if to mock our faith and thereby mock our God. It’s easy to think of them and feel smug. Yet, how is your witness in the world? How are you the fragrance of Christ? How are you salt and light in a broken world?

Well, the Broncos are not playing. Too bad. How do you become a Super Bowl referee? Do you know? You start with high school games, then college. You have to have at least five seasons in the NFL with excellent ratings for past performance, physical fitness and encyclopedic knowledge of the rules. There is a background check, medical clearance and a psychological assessment. But the most important part is you have to pretend not to hate the New England Patriots, even though that is a perfectly rational. You have to be objective. You can't judge some people one way and other people another way. My son Peter's college roommate's dad is a college football referee. I asked him, "Is it hard when the whole stadium thinks you made a mistake?" "No," he said. "The hardest part is when you know you did."

The Roman church is made of Jewish and Gentile believers. Two different jerseys, two different teams, and in the minds of many, two different sets of rules. It was the hardest thing in the world to build Christian community out of people who saw each other as almost different species. It's hard to build community when half the people in the room think the rules don't apply to them. Paul is building community. It might not look like it yet, but he is. Sometimes the first step is to get everyone on the same level, the level where we all know our trouble is real and our need is great. The law has a way of doing just that. So today in our series on Romans, No Shame, we see there is a Broken Witness. Even when we know what is right, we can't do what is right. People see that and blame God.

We have talked a little bit about the two teams, the Jews and the Gentiles, the Hebrews and the Hellenists (or Romans, really, in this context). To understand this passage, we need to understand how these two groups looked at themselves. One of the great points of pride for the Jewish people was that God chose them to give the law. They were the people God trusted to have the Torah, the rules of life from

the Creator of Life. Moses said, "What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?" (Deuteronomy 4:7-8) It was special to be chosen. "He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws. Praise the Lord." (Psalms 147:19-20)

"All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous." (Romans 2:12-13) Team A is team "under the law." That's the Jewish background believers. Team B is team "apart from the law," the Roman background believers. To whom does the law apply? Team A were the insiders. The beloved community. The children of Abraham, and ironically, they thought they could escape responsibility. The boss's kids get away with anything, don't they? The rules are different for us. What teacher can run a classroom when half the kids think they are special? What team leader can expect results when half the team thinks the rules don't apply to them? Team A, you don't get off just because you know the rules. Team B, you don't get off just because you don't know the rules. It's not what you know but what you obey. It's obedience that gets judged, not awareness. The law applies to all. If we are to be judged by the law, it is total obedience that is required. We are all in the same situation, the same boat. Our trouble is real and our need is great.

Fascinating little bit here in 14-15. Have you ever wondered what happens to people who have never heard of all this? They don't have the Bible. They don't have the Gospel. Or they are infants or people without intellectual capabilities to understand. They live and die and come to judgment before God. What

happens? Those “apart from the law” still have some knowledge or conscience. I don’t know what happens to them, but I know that God will judge and his judgments will be good and fair. And, if I may add, their salvation will still be dependent on the atoning work of Christ on the cross. That’s the only way. God will judge. That’s verse 16: “This will take place on the day when God judges people’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.” (Romans 2:16) “He will come to judge the living and the dead.” Judgment is real. It is coming. Nothing will be kept secret, all that is hidden will be revealed. It is handled by Jesus who will come to judge. It will be fair and right, just and good, and you have the opportunity to know the judge right now.

Okay, now Team A is about to get it. Paul is about to really lay into them. Sometimes to get on the same level, some of us need a little...encouragement...to dismount a certain high horse. “Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?” (Romans 2:17-22) See, here’s the problem. You see yourself as a righteous guide, you know the law, you know what God requires. But do you walk the talk? Do you practice what you preach? I was recently sharing a talk about joy I have given a few times. In part of that talk, I encourage people to turn their minds to good things. Peace doesn’t grow in soil riddled with crime podcasts, dystopian fantasies, or explicit material; it doesn’t grow with shouting heads on cable news or social media. Anyway, I was launching into all that when suddenly the

Holy Spirit showed up on my shoulder. “Tim! You dummy! That’s exactly what you do!” Those are the places I go in stress, when I seek comfort in the wrong places. Me too. Do you talk the talk or walk the walk? How many heroes of the faith have fallen? I have friends who have walked away from the faith, turned away from Jesus, because of a pastor or leader who was one thing up front on stage and another thing entirely behind the scenes. Broken witness.

Team A was feeling pretty good about themselves. No one else knows right and wrong like we do. No one else knows the mind of God like us. No one else has the owner’s manual to life in this world, handed to us directly from the manufacturer himself! Paul says, wait a minute. First of all, you might have missed this, back in verse 15 he said about Romans, “They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness...” (Romans 2:15) Written on their hearts? “That’s not for Gentiles. That’s supposed to happen when the Messiah comes for us!” We are not so special. But also it isn’t knowledge of the law that matters, but obedience. When you teach others and then don’t do the same yourself it is a Broken Witness. “You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: ‘God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.’” (Romans 2:23-24) Ouch.

Team A. Team B. Leaders. Followers. Apostles. Sinners. How can we keep from this broken witness that does more harm than good? How can we all get on the same level before the cross? It starts with this: we are all in trouble and we are all in need of grace. Our trouble is real and our need is great. The law isn’t there to make some people feel good and others feel bad. The law is there to tell us all the truth about ourselves. Martin Luther spent a lot of time thinking about this, the purpose of the law. Not one to pull punches, he said, “The Law has its terminus, defining how far it is to go and what it is to achieve, namely,

to terrify the impenitent with the wrath and displeasure of God and drive them to Christ.” -Martin Luther. The law is to terrify the impenitent and drive them to Christ. His friend said it more sweetly, “The Law shows the disease, the Gospel the cure.” -Philip Melancthon. I love medicine. Isn't medicine great? But one thing I never do is just browse the aisle. I never just go wandering up and down the medicine aisle looking for something fun. No. It is only when you are sick that you seek the medicine, only when you are in pain you look for the cure. It's only when you accept the trouble you are in you look for help in Jesus.

The law is a fair referee. The Bible is an impartial judge. It shows us what we didn't know, how our choices were breaking our relationship with God. I once heard of a woman who didn't realize she had developed a thirty-pound tumor in her abdomen. I'm pretty sure it was in Florida. Wow, did she feel better! I never knew Red Dye #5 was toxic. I used to take a box of fruit roll ups and wrap one on every finger on my hand. It's good to know. We look at the law. You pick up the Ten Commandments. Oh, I didn't realize. I didn't know. I didn't know my trust in things other than God was idolatry. You mean not taking a Sabbath is breaking the law of God? I didn't know using the Lord's name in vain was hurting my relationship with God. “I don't do that too much do I? How many times a day do I say that? 10,000! Jeezsu...” Jesus took it further with the Sermon on the Mount. You can't worship God and money. You haven't committed adultery? You haven't engaged in sexual activity outside of marriage? Good! But just to look at a woman with lust is the same. You haven't murdered? Great! But to call someone a fool, to disregard their humanity, that's just as damaging. Sin is sin. I didn't know.

Sin is sin. The trouble is real and the need is great. Our sins separate us from God. That's why God feels distant. That's why God's love feels flat and cold. It's not God. It's us. We are washing ourselves in sin

without even knowing. These things are contributing to your illness. This is what brings that gray cloud over your head; that dark cloud that seems to follow you around dropping a steady, cold drizzle over your life, taking the color out of everything and you press on through your days fighting off a vague sense of dissatisfaction. This is why you feel powerless at times, stuck in patterns you despise. Our sins push us into a compromised existence. “God's law fits us; it is the law of our own being. We are authentically human only when we obey it. When we disobey it, we not only rebel against God, we also contradict our true selves.” -John Stott There are things we are doing we don't even know separate us from God. I didn't know I was poisoning the well. Augustine said the chains of his sins rattled so loud he could hardly hear God. We are all the same. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. Every one of us. Team A. Team B. When we look at what righteousness requires, we truly find we are lost in sin. The trouble is real and the need is great. What will we do? Where will we turn?

The law is a fair referee, an impartial judge. There is only one who fulfilled the law. Jesus led a perfect and sinless life. “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” (Hebrews 4:15) He kept the law we could not keep. Then he paid the penalty for our disobedience and rebellion. The trouble is real and the need is great. Turn to Jesus. If you want to heal a broken witness, lay down all self-righteousness. Put it away. Allow only the righteousness of Christ. That is our witness. I am not perfect. I am saved by Jesus. Let all our witness be only to him.