

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
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Sermon title: The Danger of Nominal Christianity, Romans 2:12-29

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INTRODUCTION: Here's a question for you. *Is it better for a person to call himself a Christian and not really live by it or for someone to be a flat-out, complete atheist?* Another way to say it is, "Is it better to be completely lost or kind of lost?" The word *Christian* means "little Christ," and if a person is claiming to be a "little Christ" but does not actually reflect Christlikeness, then that person is misrepresenting Christ. Perhaps that's what's wrong with our world.

Have you ever been misrepresented and spent a lot of time trying to correct the misrepresentation? What if someone misrepresented you, and you weren't present to make the correction? Think about Jesus. Are we representing him fairly?

Today, we are talking about the nominal Christian—the Christian by name. This is a hard topic. Let's take a hard look at nominal Christianity versus being a disciple, a follower of Christ. This is hard because many of us take pride in what we call ourselves. We need to step aside though and let the Holy Spirit tell us who we are in Christ.

I have four main points to my message today:

1. The confusion of nominal Christianity.
2. The false appearance of nominal Christianity.
3. The superficiality of nominal Christianity.
4. The blasphemy of nominal Christianity.

Turn with me to Romans Chapter 2. We talked last week about the danger in judging others and not repenting. Paul spent the first part of the chapter on the judgment of Christ. Both those with the Law and those without the Law will perish because of their sin. Un-repentance is storing up wrath.

Now, we will see how Paul shifts to the religious audience—the Jews of his day. We will see what Jesus says to them has a lot to say to us—warning us against nominal Christianity.

First, THE CONFUSION OF NOMINAL CHRISTIANITY

When you appear spiritually superior, calling yourself a Christian, without an inward reality of the Spirit of God, you will get praise from people. But, unless the Spirit of the Lord calls you a child of God, you will be judged according to Jesus Christ. What does this mean? Let's look in Romans 2:12—

SCRIPTURE: Romans 2:12-16 ¹² *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.* ¹³ *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.* ¹⁴ *(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law.* ¹⁵ *They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.)* ¹⁶ *This will take place on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.*

EXPLANATION: First, Paul says those who sin apart from the Law will perish without the Law....This is the Gentile, or today, it would be those without the Bible. But, then he moves to say: Those who sin under the law will be judged by the law. Those who hear the Word of God aren't saved because they hear but because they do what it requires.

But, it goes on to say God will judge our secrets through Jesus Christ.

(v. 16): *God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.*

EXPLANATION: How does God judge our secrets? It's through Jesus Christ. How exactly does this work?

First of all, Jesus is the light. He brings to light what was hidden in the darkness. He is the Word. He pierces the soul, dividing the flesh from the marrow. Jesus is the mediator. Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves. Even when we don't know what to pray, the Spirit prays for us. Even when our heart condemns us, he is greater and knows us better.

I believe what Paul means in this scripture is that the Holy Spirit will convict us when we have thoughts and secrets we shouldn't have. Judging us according to Christ means he has, is, and will continue to forgive us of our sin. This doesn't give a license to sin, as we'll study later in Romans.

APPLICATION: Have you ever heard, “We sin every day and don’t know it”? I disagree with that statement. If the Holy Spirit doesn’t blow the whistle when we sin, there is a problem.

Calling yourself a Christian doesn’t make you one. Don’t be confused by this. I’m afraid there are a lot of people who carry the title but not the walk that goes with it.

- So, I just talked about the confusion of nominal Christianity—

Second, THE FALSE APPEARANCE OF NOMINAL CHRISTIANITY

Paul addressed those who called themselves Jews—those who had secrets in their hearts—but who looked very spiritual and superior on the outside.

SCRIPTURE: Romans 2:17-24 ¹⁷ *Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; ¹⁸ if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; ¹⁹ if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— ²¹ you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal?²² You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? ²⁴ As it is written: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”*

EXPLANATION: Look back and see, there are 8 advantages of the Jews listed:

1. The Law—*you rely on the law... (v. 17)*
2. A special relationship with God—*you boast in God (v. 17)*
3. A knowledge of God’s will—*if you know his will (v. 18)*
4. Good moral standards—*approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law (v. 18)*
5. Being a guide for the blind—*convinced you are a guide for the blind (v. 19)*
6. Being a light—*a light for those who are in the dark (v. 19)*
7. Teachers—*an instructor of the foolish (v. 20)*
8. An example—*a teacher of little children (v.20)*

You see, when Jesus came, everything changed. He fulfilled the Law of Moses, and now what saved people was not following the Law, but repenting of sin and following Jesus. All the things they listed were good things. I don’t think much has

changed... The list has changed, but it's easy to harbor a spiritually superior attitude because of our own lists... like the list Paul struck down.

- So, I've talked about the confusion and false appearance—

Third, THE SUPERFICIALITY OF NOMINAL CHRISTIANITY

Look at the end of verse 20—It gives the reason for why these Jews were convinced they were a guide for others.

(V. 20): *Because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—*

EXPLANATION: The word used here is “embodiment.” It is not a true likeness. It is not knowledge and truth actually—but the appearance of it. This is the same word used in 2 Timothy 3:5 to describe people who are actually lovers of themselves and unholy...but, they have *a form of godliness*.

SCRIPTURE: 2 Timothy 3:2-5 ² *People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, ⁴ treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—⁵ having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people.*

EXPLANATION: In 2 Timothy, Paul describes people who are definitely not godly...but, yet they have an appearance, a form of godliness. But, listen: These people deny its power. They deny the power of godliness...They deny the power of the Holy Spirit.

In Romans 2, we see people who appear spiritually superior, but their spirituality rests on the outside. Let's learn from a lesson this morning. Outward appearances don't mean much to God.

Continue in verse 25—

SCRIPTURE: Romans 2:25-27 ²⁵ *Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. ²⁶ So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? ²⁷ The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.*

EXPLANATION: Circumcision was an outward symbol of an inward reality. It identified a person with the wider fellowship of God’s people—brought together to God in covenant. It was a God-given sign. A physical change of the body was meant to show an inward reality. But, here Paul said this sign had no value if you break the law...It’s *as if you had not ever been circumcised*. He goes on—

SCRIPTURE: Romans 2:28-29 ²⁸ *A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. ²⁹ No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person’s praise is not from other people, but from God.*

EXPLANATION: The outward signs of spirituality are superficial. If the inward reality—circumcision of the heart—doesn’t take place, a person is not changed. You can be different than the world on the outside, but if you are not any different—not holy and set apart on the inside—you are no different.

APPLICATION: Paul wanted the people to move past outward appearances and understand heart change.

But, what happens if a person is caught up in outward appearances? To be baptized without an inward reality is as if you were never baptized. It is dangerous. It must be of the heart. We must be baptized in our hearts by the baptism of the Spirit—not just with water.

We might be applauded when we do outwardly spiritual things, but when we are changed by the Spirit of God, see what happens. Read the end of verse 29 again, *Such a person’s praise is not from other people, but from God* (v. 29).

***Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart* (1 Samuel 16:7).

So, we have, regarding nominal Christianity, that is—a person calling himself or herself a Christian without any heart change: the confusion, the false appearance, the superficiality, and now—

Last, THE BLASPHEMY OF NOMINAL CHRISTIANITY

Not only will nominal Christians receive judgment and fail to experience the inner reality of the Spirit of God—but, they will go against the very thing they were created for. They will dishonor God’s name.

Look again at verse 24—

SCRIPTURE: Romans 2:24 ²⁴ *As it is written: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”*

Blasphemy is a serious thing.

CONCLUSION: I opened with a question, *Is it better for a person to call himself a Christian and not really live by it or for someone to be a flat-out, complete atheist?*

Let’s guard ourselves from clinging to the name of Christ without the Spirit of Christ. Let’s guard ourselves from trying to be spiritually superior without the Spirit of Christ. Let’s guard ourselves from superficial outward signs. And, let’s boast only in one thing—the power of Christ in our lives.

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