

Intro: You, perhaps, have heard the story of Cotton Fitzsimmons. When he was coach of the NBA Atlanta Hawks, he once gave a pre-game pep talk. He said to his players, "Instead of being in last place, pretend we're in first place. Instead of being on a losing streak, pretend we're on a winning streak. Instead of being in a regular season game, pretend this is a playoff." The team went out, played the game, and got trounced! After the game, Fitzsimmons didn't know what to do. A player slapped him on the back and said, "Cheer up, coach, and pretend we won." (told by Erwin Lutzer, Word of Life magazine, Jan 91).

This morning we're going to deal with the problem of presumption. It's a great problem, especially in religious circles. Churches are full of people who PRESUME that all is well between them and God. And they may be wrong in their presumption. It's possible to live a life of pretense, of delusion. We can cling to a thread of false assurance.

How do you help a person who makes false presumptions about their relationship with God? How do you help a religious person see that what they have is self-righteousness, and not the saving righteousness of Jesus Christ? We find the answer in Romans 2:17-24. You see, Paul had some friends who were plagued by the problem of presumption. He was burdened for them. They were his countrymen, the Jews. He felt for them, for he himself was once in their shoes of delusion. He knew, though they did not, that they were in serious trouble.

The message of Romans 2:17-24 is for such a person. In it, Paul exposes the false assurance of the religious Jew who has not received Jesus Christ. How did he expose it? For that matter, how today can we help a person who clings to false assurance? What can we do to help those we care for deal with the problem of presumption? And how can we make sure we ourselves are not blinded by false presumptions in our relationship with God?

The solution is two words--take inventory.

For example, suppose you are going to build a house. A friend says to you, "Will you finish it?" You reply, "Oh sure, no problem." How do you know for sure? Realizing it's possible to have false assurance, you take inventory, and assume nothing. You make sure you have the right builder, the right materials, the right amount of time before winter, the right size lot, the right blueprints, and the right amount of money.

We take inventory in lots of areas. We take our cars to the mechanic for a checkup. We take our bodies to the Dr. for a checkup. Business owners take inventory regularly to assess their company. But a lot of people are afraid to take spiritual inventory of their lives. Why? We're afraid of what we might discover.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

Proposition: In order to deal with the problem of presumption in Romans 2:17-24, Paul helps us take inventory of two areas of our lives. A checkup of these two areas will reveal the true condition of our relationship with God.

- I. Take inventory of you Attitudes (17-20).
 - A. "I'm Ok because I have the right resources." (17-18)
 - 1. I have the right name.
 - 2. I have the right Book.
 - 3. I have the right God.
 - 4. I have the right plan.
 - 5. I have the right values.
 - 6. I have the right training.
 - B. "I'm Ok because I have the right reputation." (19-20)
 - 1. I am a guide.
 - 2. I am a light.
 - 3. I am an instructor.
 - 4. I am a teacher.
- II. Take inventory of your Actions (21-24).
 - A. Do I practice what I preach? (21-23)
 - B. Does my life bring glory to God? (24)

I. Take inventory of you Attitudes (17-20).

V 17 beings, "But if thou art called a Jew." The pronoun "thou" is second person, singular. The word "if" indicates this is what is known as a first class conditional statement, which is a statement assumed to be true. What's that mean? Just this. Paul is writing to individuals who were called Jews, and proud of the name. It's as if he looks his reader in the eye, and says this, "I want to talk to YOU, one on one. I want to ask you to take inventory of your attitudes."

What was the attitude of the typical, religious Jew in Paul's day? Paul shows us in vv 17-20. He exposes the Jew's attitude in two areas. Both areas contributed to the Jew's sense of presumption.

Context: Keep this in mind. In Romans 1-3, Paul is describing three categories of people. In Romans 1, Paul revealed the condition of the heathen. The heathen is under the wrath of God. He is guilty of gross sin. In 2:1-16, Paul moves the spotlight from the heathen to the humanist (moralist). Though the humanist does a lot of good, humanitarian things, he too is under the wrath of God, and needs the righteousness of God. In 2:17, the spotlight hits the third category of people, the Hebrew.

A good Jew would have nodded his head in agreement all the way through Romans 1:18-32. There was no question in his mind that the heathen was in trouble. And as Paul admonished the humanist in 2:1-16, the Jewish reader probably thought, "Well, he's talking to Gentile humanists. Yea, they are in trouble. But I'm a Jew. I'm Ok." It's to that person, the religious Hebrew, that Paul speaks beginning in 2:17.

Why would a religious Jew be so convinced that he was Ok with God? Because of two ingrained attitudes which were rooted in his thinking.

A. "I'm Ok because I have the right resources." (17-18)

Let me say this up front. The problem was not with the resources themselves. The Jews were a privileged people. God chose them, and blessed them with certain resources largely known to non-Jews. The problem wasn't with the resources, but with the attitude that developed towards them. What resources did the Jew possess that the Gentile did not? And what was his attitude towards them?

1. I have the right name.

V 17 "But if thou art called a Jew." A Jew. The Jewish people are the apple of God's eye. God chose Abraham, and promised to bless his descendants. And He has. It is nothing short of a miracle that the Jewish people exist today. They have endured purging after purging, holocaust after holocaust, and have survived.

In Paul's day, Rome conquered the world, but it did not conquer the Jew. Oh, Rome occupied the land of the Jews, but not the heart of the Jews. The name "Jew" was a source of pride, a badge which continues to this day. Originally the title "Jew" described a member of the tribe of Judah. Over centuries, the name broadened. The Jews maintained separation from the world. They wore different dress, ate a different diet, observed different holy days.

Paul knew a Jew could have false assurance. He knew from personal experience what his Jewish reader was thinking, "I'm Ok because I am called a Jew. I have the right name."

We wrestle with the same problem. Every year we update our church membership list. We revise the list by removing the names of people who have violated the command of God's Word and no longer come to church. And once in awhile, an upset friend or family member will say, "Don't take their name off!" I understand the pain. They long to see their loved one back in fellowship with God and His people. But listen. If we think having our name on a membership list puts us in right standing with God, it doesn't. In fact, it can do more harm than good because it promotes a false sense of security.

2. I have the right Book.

V 17 "But if thou...retest in the Law." The word "rest" means "to take comfort in, to find support in." The Jews were proud that God gave them the "Law." The word "Law" (nomos) appears over 70 times in Romans. The usage varies. Sometimes it refers to the commands God gave to Israel through Moses. Sometimes it refers to the entire Hebrew Scriptures. Sometimes it refers to the immense volumes of rabbinic material that had been attached to the biblical literature (Briscoe, 68).

In this case, the point is clear. Paul knew his reader had the mistaken notion, "I'm Ok with God because I have the Law. I have the right book." The problem was not with the Book, but with the person's attitude towards it.

Again, we are prone to do the same. We can shout all we want, "We've got the book! We believe the Bible is inspired and inerrant!" We may even assert, "We hold to the 1611 KJV!" But like the Jews, we can be guilty of presumption.

3. I have the right God.

V 17 "But if thou...makest thy boast of God." The NIV puts it this way, "If you brag about your relationship to God." You see, there's a eternal difference between being in favor of God and living for God. One is lip-service, the other is life-service.

The Jew boasted, "I'm Ok because I'm a Jew. God is on my side. I have the right God." Was he right? Yes, he did have the "right" God. But no, he was not Ok. Why not? Because he had rejected the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. That's what Peter told the Jewish crowd in Acts 2:36, "Therefore, let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God has made that same Jesus, whom you have crucified, both Lord and Christ."

4. I have the right plan.

V 18 "And knowest His will." The problem of the Jew was not ignorance. He knew the truth. He heard the Scriptures from childhood. Every week in the synagogue he learned about the plan of God. From the promise God made to Adam, to the covenant with Abraham, to the guarantee of the kingly line of David, to the prophecies through Isaiah and the prophets, he knew God's plan. The Messiah was coming.

The Jew could say, "I'm Ok because I have the right plan. I know God's will." But, here's the problem. We can know God's will, and not DO God's will. Knowing I should be in church on Sunday is no substitute for being here. Knowing it's God's plan for me to give Him my tithes and offerings is no substitute for doing it.

5. I have the right values.

V 18 "And approvest the things that are more excellent." Because the Jew had the Law of God, he knew what God's standard was. He knew a holy God demands holy living. He knew what God expected, the type of life God valued. He could say, "I have the right values."

A word of application. We are a privileged people to know biblical values. We must uphold those values in our lives. But we must also be very careful lest we become proud that we live by God's values, while others don't. But for the grace of God.

Where did the Jew learn right values? Notice his sixth resource.

6. I have the right training.

V 18 "Being instructed out of the Law." The word is "catechoumenos," similar to our word "catechism." The Jews were diligent in training their children. Catechetical lessons in the synagogue were a regular part of life for a Jewish youngster. A Jew could say, "I have had the right training."

Let that sink in. There's no question that the Jew had great privilege. These six resources were his. He had the right name, Book, God, plan, values, and training. Those resources affected his attitude, "I must be Ok! I must be right with God!"

There was a second area that influenced his attitude.

B. "I'm Ok because I have the right reputation." (19-20)

Notice the first words of v 19, "And art confident (NIV "convinced")." It's good to be confident. But sometimes it's dangerous, as in the Jewish reader's case.

What was the religious Jew's attitude towards his reputation? He had four inflated views of his reputation. He said... (read vv 19-20)

1. *I am a guide.*
2. *I am a light.*
3. *I am an instructor.*
4. *I am a teacher.*

Look again at vv 19-20. To the Jew, who are the "blind"? Who are those "who are in darkness"? Who are the "foolish"? Who are the "babes"? The Gentiles. The typical Jew looked down on the Gentile, "I've got the truth. You don't. You are blind, in darkness, foolish, a babe. I'm a guide, a light, an instructor, a teacher."

Some Christians are like that. They have an answer for everything (and are glad to tell you, even if you don't ask). But they, like the Jew, are in danger. They have an warped view of their reputation. It's important to have a good reputation, but it's dangerous to boast about it.

You may be thinking, "You don't seem to think that the Jew in Paul's day was the only person to struggle with the problem of presumption, do you?" No. The same disease plagues us. We presume too much. I am convinced there will be people in hell who presumed all was well between them and God.

We all need to take inventory. First, of our attitudes.

II. Take inventory of your Actions (21-24).

The "action" inventory comes in the form of a series of rhetorical questions. They are summed up by the following question.

A. Do I practice what I preach? (21-23)

Vv 21-24 "Thou, therefore, who teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? Thou that preachest...dost thou steal? Thou that sayest...dost thou commit adultery? Thou that makest...dost thou commit sacrilege?"

Back in ch 1, we learned that heathen's problem is threefold. He sins against himself (1:24 "dishonor their own bodies"). He sins against others (1:27 "burned in their lust toward another"). And He sins against God (1:21 "When they knew God, they glorified Him not as God.").

Here's the shocking irony. The Hebrew's problem is no different. He, too, sins against himself, by not practicing what he preaches (2:21). He, too, sins against others, by stealing and committing adultery (2:21b-22a). He, too, sins against God, by committing sacrilege (2:22b "rob temples") (see McGee, 52).

That was a hard-to-swallow-pill for a religious Jew, to insinuate he was no better off than a pagan Gentile. Yet the shocking truth could not be avoided. With these four questions, Paul forces his Jewish friend to take inventory, "True, you have the Law, but do you keep it? True, you have higher moral values than the pagans, but do you live up to them perfectly? True, you have had the right training, but does your conduct match your creed?"

The point is this. Being better than somebody else doesn't make you right with God. Only a relationship with Jesus Christ does. And how can we tell if our relationship with Christ is genuine. Ask yourself, "Do I practice what I preach?" And,

B. Does my life bring glory to God? (24)

No doubt, Paul's Jewish reader was completely floored by what he read in v 24, "For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles THROUGH YOU." The Jews prided themselves in several things, not the least of which was their careful use of the name of God. They were meticulous about God's name--they wouldn't say it, their scribes washed their hands when they wrote it. They looked down on Gentiles as those who blasphemed God's name by worshipping false gods.

Then Paul dropped this bomb, "You may think you are a model citizen, but the truth is, you cause the Gentiles to blaspheme the name of God!" Woa! I admire Paul. He spoke the truth in love (Eph 4:15). Those were not popular words, yet they were true. In fact, he was quoting Scripture to prove his point (Isa 52:5).

You say, "How did the Jews cause the Gentiles to blaspheme God's name?" The same way we do--by exhibiting behavior that doesn't match the beliefs we profess.

Scandals are not unique to our age. The Jewish historian Josephus records that in the year AD 19, four Jews who were living in Rome were teaching the Jewish faith to interested Gentiles. They came across a noble, well-to-do Roman lady, who had converted to Judaism. They persuaded her to make a large contribution of money to the temple in Jerusalem. They took the money, and you guessed it. The money never made it to Jerusalem. They used it for themselves. When the Emperor Tiberius found out about it, he expelled all resident Jews from Rome. The actions of those four men caused the name "Jew" to be mocked by the rest of the world (Bruce, 93).

Listen. Whenever we stop practicing what we preach, do you know what happens? It causes the name of Jesus Christ to be blasphemed by the world. "Hah! Me, become a Christian? That'll be the day. Christians are a bunch of hypocrites!"

Is it true that all Christians are hypocrites? No, but it only takes a few to bring shame on the name of Christ.

Here's the question we must all ask ourselves, "Does my life bring glory to God?" Does your life cause the people around you to glorify God or blaspheme God? Do you attract people to Christ or repel them from Christ?

The familiar poem puts it this way (McGee, 52), "The gospel is written a chapter a day, by deeds that you do and words that you say. Men read what you say, whether faithless or true, say, what is the gospel according to you?"

Conclusion:

We've taken inventory this morning. Why? To deal with the ever-present danger of presumption. Would you ask yourself these questions: How is my relationship with God? Am I clinging to false assurance, or do I have a genuine relationship with Jesus Christ? If you are not sure, call out to Him today--He will come into your life. Then ask yourself: Am I walking in obedience to Christ?