

Red Herrings

by Ray C. Stedman

Let us begin with Romans 2, Verse 17.

Perhaps you are wondering a little bit about the title chosen for this study together, *Red Herrings*. It doesn't mean that there is something fishy about Romans. It is a phrase that you recognize is used frequently in conversation. It is a phrase that President Truman helped to popularize in his administration. Do you remember, he suggested that the Alger Hiss case was a "red herring," arranged to divert suspicion from the true issues of the day. He was, of course, mistaken in that. The judgment of history proved him to be so wrong that this phrase has become part of the language of the street.

A "red herring" is something that diverts attention away from an issue. It originated, I understand, from the practice of fugitives from justice who were trying to flee from prison and were being tracked by bloodhounds. In order to throw the dogs off the scent, they would drag a red herring across their path and thus try to confuse the scent and divert the issue.

In the opening verses of this chapter, the Apostle Paul showed us that God is an utter realist. He sees beneath all the varnish and the facade of our lives. He knows all our secrets. He sees the skeletons rattling in our closets. He knows all the carefully concealed, hidden areas of our life that we keep away from every other eye.

Imagine what it would be like if suddenly, by some strange process, everyone in this room knew everything about everyone else! Wouldn't we do like those Pharisees before the Lord Jesus, on one occasion? Beginning with the oldest, we would get up and quietly go out, one by one {cf, John 8:9}, wouldn't we? And when we begin to realize that God sees us like that continuously, we begin to grow uncomfortable in his presence – especially

when we realize that God wants to talk to us about this. It isn't so bad when we realize in the back of our minds that God does see these things, so long as he doesn't mention them to us. But when God starts being difficult about these things, and wants to talk to us about them, then we grow uncomfortable – like Adam and Eve when God came into the garden, and called, "Where art thou?" {Gen 3:9 KJV}. They realized they were naked and began to reach for fig leaves to cover their nakedness. So do men, when they begin to see what God is really like – they grow uncomfortable and start looking for a red herring to drag across the path to throw God off the trail.

Now, in these verses before us, we will see some of the "red herrings" that men so frequently use. This is such a natural reaction.

Remember when Christ spoke to the woman at the well in Samaria? He awakened her interest with his word about the living water that he could give her. Then he suddenly told her, "Go, call thy husband," {John 4:16 KJV}. And when she confessed that she didn't have any husband, he said to her, "Yes, but you have had five husbands, and the man that you are living with now is not your husband," {cf, John 4:18}. He began to move in on the secrets of her life. So you remember what she did? She threw in a red herring. She turned to the mountain, and said, "Our fathers say this is the place to worship God, but you Jews say it is in Jerusalem," {cf, John 4:20}. She tried to throw him off track with a theological issue – and this is the way we react so frequently.

This is what we have here in Romans. Here we examine some of the most common of these "red herrings" with which we try to throw God off the trail, hoping he will be satisfied and leave us alone.

The first is to have or hold a **proper kind of creed**. Notice Verses 17-24:

But if you call yourself a Jew and rely upon the law and boast of your relation to God, and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed in the law, and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth – you then who teach others, will 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, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” {Rom 2:17-24 RSV}

The most frequent facade that men erect between themselves and God, strangely enough, is religion. When God begins to bear down upon our life, and we become aware of the kind of person he is, and how thoroughly he knows us, almost invariably we tend to get a little religious.

This is the Jew of Paul’s day who is before us here, of course. And unquestionably he was the world’s greatest religionist. These are the pretensions (and notice they are not pretenses) that he makes. My, what a religious person is here – knowing God’s will, approving what is excellent, instructed in the Law – sure they are a light to the blind, to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, and so on. They were sure that God would accept them because they knew so much good theology. But Paul, you notice, removes the props very neatly with a few searching questions on how these people live. With a few questions, designed to probe the conscience a bit, he exposes the hypocrisy of their position.

In other words, as Paul points out, God isn’t fooled by the Apostles’ Creed recited devoutly every Sunday, or by the Lord’s Prayer piously prayed, or by a Scofield Reference Bible carried under the arm to church every day. These things may fool men, but they don’t fool God in the least. God’s question is always, “What effect does this truth have upon you?”

You know these things, now what does it do to you?

- How does it affect you?
- Does it make you more rigid and unbending and legalistic and demanding?
- Do your neighbors invite you in for coffee when they see you – or do they turn their back and look the other way whenever you are out in the yard?
- Does it make you easy to do business with – or does it make you a shrewd operator that nobody can trust?

This is the question, you see. God’s question is never, “What is your creed?” Now, creeds are important. I don’t mean to deny that, but this is never the essential thing. God’s final question to man is never “What is your creed?” but “What is your influence.” Do men blaspheme God because of you? This was the devastating indictment that Paul brought against these Jews. He said, “You can claim all these things – and perhaps they are true, and perhaps they are not – but the great issue is that, everywhere you Jews go, the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of the way you live.”

You see how Paul devastates the one who trusts simply in some outward creed, or some proper religious statement, as an indication that he ought to be acceptable before God.

I remember reading some time ago of a couple of young men who were standing on a street corner in Glasgow, Scotland, when a very dignified-looking older man walked by them. One of these young men turned to the other, and said, “You see that man? He is the founder of the infidels club here in Glasgow.” And the other young man said, “Why, you must be mistaken! I know that man. He is an elder of the church where I belong.” The first young man said, “That is exactly what I mean. He is an elder of the church, but the way he conducts himself in his business life, and in his personal affairs, he has turned so many away from God that he is literally the founder of the infidels club here in Glasgow.”

Now, this is what Paul is getting at.

I heard the other day a quotation that I want to share with you this morning, because I think it reflects this so wonderfully – so truthfully. It is by Chad Walsh, and appears in a book he has written, called *Early Christians of the Twenty-first Century*. This is what he says:

Millions of Christians live in a sentimental haze of vague piety with soft organ music trembling in the lovely light from the stained glass windows. Their religion is a thing of pleasant emotional quivers divorced from the intellect, and demanding little except lip service to a few harmless platitudes. I suspect that Satan has called off the attempt to convert people to agnosticism. If a man travels far enough away from Christianity, he is always in danger of seeing it in perspective and deciding that it is true. It is much safer from Satan's point of view to vaccinate a man with a mild case of Christianity so as to protect him from the real thing.

I am afraid that this is the position of many today. You see, this is the issue that Paul is raising. As soon as God begins to get real and vital about matters, we raise the matter of our creed and we simply say: "Look, this is what we believe. What is wrong with that?" And, of course, there is nothing wrong with the creed, but the issue is: What does it do to your life? How much has it changed you at home?

Now Paul goes on to a closely related issue. He raises the question here of a **prescribed ritual**. This is another "red herring." Notice Verses 25-29:

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 those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. He is a Jew who is one inwardly and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal. His praise is not from men but from God. {Rom 2:25-29 RSV}

There is a little play on words here. The word *praise* is a play on the word *Jew*, because the word *Jew* means "praise." It comes from the {Hebrew} word *juda*, which means "praise." These Jews were praising themselves because they had the rite of circumcision. This was the great mark of the true people of God. Whenever anybody questioned their standing before God, they only had to refer to the fact that they were circumcised – this was the great mark.

Now, in the place of circumcision, you can put a number of equivalent things: You can put baptism, confirmation, church membership, communion, mother's prayers – almost anything you want. How frequently you find people raising these things!

I have often said to someone, "Well, are you a Christian?" And the answer I get is, "Well, I am a Catholic," or, "I am a Baptist," or "I was raised a Methodist," or, "I've been baptized." This is such a common thing. Just let the Spirit of God begin to probe into the state of the heart, and you see men quickly hold up their baptism certificate between them and God, and say, "Now, this what I ought to be judged on."

In the case of the Jews, it was circumcision. But, as Paul is pointing out here, God isn't fooled one bit by this. There are many uncircumcised (as Paul also points out), and also many unbaptized, unconfirmed, unpasteurized, unsimonized individuals who behave just as well as those who have been baptized, circumcised, simonized, or whatever it is.

Do you see? These things do not add anything to a person – that is the point – they don't do a thing for you. Regardless of what you have been taught, there is no value in an outward ordinance or outward ritual – none whatsoever.

"Well," you say, "what is a religious ritual, anyway? Why are these things here?" And the answer is: A ritual or rite is saying something to God in actions instead of words.

Now, if the meaning has been deleted from it by lack of commitment of the heart, then it is a meaningless gesture. If you do these things because you think God requires them, not because they are a voluntary expression of what you really want to say to God, then they are as meaningless as buying a birthday gift for yourself. In other words, God is simply saying here that he is interested in

ritual, and these rites mean something to him only if they genuinely express something that comes from the heart.

Baptism means that I am dying to the old life of selfishness and self-centeredness and self-living, and I am determined to expose my life to the control of Christ, and to live for the glory of God. Now, if it means that to us, it is a wonderful expression to God; but if you have the baptism without the meaning, it is a perfectly horrible thing. Don't insult the God who loves you by muttering some meaningless mumbo-jumbo before him, or play-acting some religious hocus-pocus that leaves you uninvolved, and, therefore, unchanged – this is what Paul is saying.

I heard of a dentist who took X-rays of every patient who came in and then made a special proposition to them. He said, "For ten dollars I will fill these cavities that you have here, but, if you don't want to pay that much, for five dollars I will retouch the X-rays." Now, the ritual without the meaning behind it is like that, it is a retouched X-ray – the cavity is still there.

A third "red herring" is found in the first four verses of Chapter 3. You see, Paul is answering the thoughts of the minds of his readers, and he raises the questions that must now be in everyone's mind:

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews are entrusted with the oracles of God. What if some were unfaithful? Does their unfaithfulness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Let God be true though every man be false, as it is written,

**"That thou mayest be justified in thy words,
and prevail when thou art judged."**

{Rom 3:1-4 RSV}

Now, this is the "red herring" of a **privileged position**. By this time, the Jews who would read this were beginning to get a little indignant with the apostle. They were saying to him, in effect:

"Look, the way you sound, it is as though these privileges that God has given to us – our great religious heritage – really means nothing at all. You are undervaluing our heritage."

Paul answers:

"No, I am not; these things mean a lot. The Jews have been given a position of privilege – they were given the oracles of God; they were entrusted with the message of God; they were chosen as the channel by which God would communicate with the race – and this is a tremendous privilege."

They had the message that God wanted men to have. But when they kept that word to themselves, when they viewed it as a special badge of God's favor, and they locked it within their breasts and refused to share it with others, what then? Did their faithlessness mean that God would be like them, that he would prove faithless to his own promise? "No," Paul says.

Right here is the trouble with our thinking about God. Men think that God acts like they do. If we get irritated or piqued at somebody who doesn't prove faithful to their word, we say: "Well, I'll treat them the same way. Why shouldn't I?" Men believe that God, like them, plays favorites – that he will be loyal to his gang, no matter whether they are right or wrong. But, you see, we have such wrong ideas about God. J. B. Phillips, in his wonderful book, *Your God Is Too Small*, has a series of interesting caricatures of God as men see him today. He points out that many of us are living with infantile conceptions of God – conceptions of God that we gained as children which we have never thrown off since we grew to manhood or womanhood. So many of us still have these baby-like conceptions of God. It is almost as if we were still sleeping with our Teddy Bear!

But Paul says, "Let God be true." God is faithful to his own promises though every man be false. And privilege only increases responsibility in God's sight. God demands more from those who have more light than he does from those who have less. He will not withhold his judgment because they happen to have a long and respected religious heritage – it doesn't make any difference. This is such a pitiful defense, isn't it?

Not long ago, I was asked to visit a woman whose husband had committed suicide. She lived in a hovel, and, as she met me at the door, I could see that she was drunk. She invited me in, and, as soon as I explained who I was and why I had come, the first bit of information she gave was that she

was the daughter of a Methodist minister. You see, she was trying to hide under that pitiful, shabby refuge of a heritage that she thought would be all I would want. She thought I would be impressed – and I was only saddened by what she told me.

It doesn't make any difference whether your grandfather or your grandmother was a wonderful Christian – that can't be passed on to you. God has no spiritual grandchildren. Have you noticed that? You never read about his grandchildren. You read much about his children, but never about his grandchildren – he doesn't have any. Every Christian is individually a part of the family of God. There are no second-generation Christians.

When I was a student at Dallas Theological Seminary, Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer told us he knew D. L. Moody and his family intimately, and that, so far as he could tell, he saw no indication in any of the Moody children that they ever came to know Jesus Christ. Now, that is a terrible indictment, isn't it? But, of course, you don't come to know God by natural relationship, or by belonging to a special-privilege class or group.

These things are false refuges.

We now come to another “red herring,” and this is the last one. It is the most suave and clever of all. It is found in Verses 5-8. Paul raises another question in the minds of these people. He says:

But if our wickedness serves to show the justice of God, what shall we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) By no means! For then how could God judge the world? But if through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come? – as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just. {Rom 3:5-8 RSV}

Do you see his argument? He is saying that these people who are reading this will say to themselves:

“Well, now look. If our wickedness serves to display how just and holy God is – if, against the background of our evil, he is seen in all the beauty of his glory and purity, and his creatures thus see him as he is and glorify him

– well, then, why should he condemn us? Everything has turned out all right.”

There is a pleasing result in the end, you see – that is, **the end justifies the means**. This is one of the oldest of arguments.

Now, Paul's answer is wonderful! What he says is this: “It is true that God is going to work out all his plans, and he uses the very opposition of his enemies to accomplish these plans.” That is what the cross is: The cross appeared to be the moment of triumph of all the powers of darkness and evil, but God used it to be the foundation of the victory and triumph of Jesus Christ. God does this. But Paul's question is: If God let everyone off on that basis, how then could he judge the world? Everyone would get off then. Evil would never be judged – evil would go on unrestrained – and God himself would be proven unjust and evil, if he did that.

“No,” Paul says, “I am not teaching ‘let's do evil that good may come,’” – as some were reporting that he was teaching – “because, even though God uses the wrath of man to praise him, still man is responsible for his own evil, and God will judge that.” So, you see, you no longer can say: “Well, it all turned out all right in the end – God's got nothing to worry about. Why should he condemn me? He is glorified by it.”

No, God must judge the evil of man's heart.

When I was a boy, I read a story that I have never forgotten. I have never read it since, but I have never forgotten it because it made a great impression upon me:

It was the story of a sea voyage. In the hold of a sailing ship was large quantity of guns mounted upon wheels. These guns were chained down so they would not move about as the ship made its way through a rough sea. One of the men, through carelessness, managed to release one of these guns one day; he had not properly fastened the chain, so the gun was free. A storm came up, and the gun began to roll back and forth in the hold of the ship. It worked its way out and ran the whole length of the ship. As the storm mounted in fury, the gun rolled back and forth and began to batter against the bulkhead of the ship. Soon, it was apparent that the ship was in grave danger, because, unless this gun could be secured again, it would bash its

way through the side of the ship, and the ship would sink.

So the man who had been guilty of freeing it slipped down into the hold, and, at the risk of his life, rushed out, and tried several times to get hold of the gun, and throw a rope around it. But each time, almost as if the gun were alive, when he got close to it, the ship would move in such a way that the gun came lurching toward him, and he would barely escape with his life. After several hair-breadth escapes, he managed to throw a rope about it, and they finally secured the gun.

When the danger was over, the captain called him up on the deck and gathered the whole ship's company together. He got this man before them there, and he commended him for his bravery and his heroism. And he promised him an award – a cash prize that would be his when the ship docked – for the bravery he exhibited when he saved the ship. The man began to feel proud of himself because it had all worked out so wonderfully.

But, as soon as the captain had concluded the words of commendation, he ordered the man to be tied to the mast and shot through the head for his carelessness which resulted in putting the ship in danger.

I have never forgotten that story because it illustrates something of the character and justice of God. God cannot pass over evil, and though we may have done things that are good, they do not balance out the evil.

God sees us as we are – this is what Paul is telling us.

You see, none of these hollow defenses fool God. None of these defenses stand in his sight:

- God knows how we hate to be stripped of our defenses.
- God knows how hard it is to swallow our pride.
- God knows how we cling to our self-respect and our self-confidence. We think that if we lose this – if we admit how foolish, how evil, how wrong, how perverted we are – we have nothing on which to stand. We feel like we are losing our mantle of manhood or womanhood – we are being asked to surrender our last vestige of self-respect, and to admit total guilt – and God knows that.

- But God knows something else too, and this is the point: God knows that our self-confidence is based upon a delusion.
- God knows that our self-respect is the very thing that is keeping us away from the great gifts of blessing and glory he wants to give us.
- God knows that this thing which we fight like a tiger to defend, and refuse to admit, or give up, is the very thing that is like a cancer, gnawing away at our vitals and destroying us. And so, like a faithful surgeon, God plunges the knife deeply and cuts the thing out – if we will permit him.
- And then God knows this: He has another basis of confidence, another basis of respect that he intends to give us in Jesus Christ – a confidence that cannot be shaken, a self-respect that is righteous in his sight.

If we will allow him to take away our self-confidence and our self-respect, he will give us, in its place, that which makes us all that we want to be.

Yesterday morning I heard John French, a noted British actor, tell how, when Billy Graham came to London, John determined to arrange an interview with Billy so he could punch him on the nose and expose him for the fool, the liar, the cheat, and the scoundrel that he was convinced Billy Graham was. He told about how he arranged the interview, how he had an appointment with Billy in the lobby of a hotel, and how he walked up to him determined to show him up for the charlatan that he was sure he was.

As he greeted Billy, John French drew back his fist to hit him on the nose. But the first thing he knew, Billy had John's fist in his hand, shaking it, and telling him that he was glad to see him. That rather shook him.

Then John French told how Billy arranged an appointment with him a little bit later, and they met together in a room; how John hated him, loathed him, because he stood for all this "religious racket" that he felt was "such a blight" upon men; but how, as they sat and talked, Billy asked him, "John, do you know how it feels to be crucified?"

They began to talk about crucifixion, and what the Lord went through. The Spirit of God used this in John French's life. Gradually, there was a sense of confidence awakened, and they began to talk freely. At last, he said, he knelt and received Jesus Christ as his Savior.

John French told about how he had made his success in the theater, how he had fought his way up from the ranks, how he had blasted his way to the top of his profession by the sheer weight of self-confidence. Then he said these words as he concluded his testimony: "I left the theater when I became a Christian. I enjoyed it, I thought it was wonderful, but I will never go back to it because I found something far more exciting when I found Jesus Christ."

Now, this is what God is talking about here in Romans. He is undermining all the self-righteousness of man, in order that he might give us the righteousness of Christ. This is the free gift he offers every individual who will receive it. You can't have both. It is either your righteousness, your confidence, your self-respect, or it is that which comes from Jesus Christ as free gift to anyone who will have him. He is available to men and

women today as much as he was in the days of his flesh.

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, how we thank you for the truth of this great message in Romans, how, through the centuries, men and women, having read this book, have found these things to be true. They have believed the simple writing. They have invited Jesus Christ into their life. They have found him to be the Living Savior. Anything else, anything other than this, they have found not sufficient. They have found the one who satisfies the deepest longings of the heart. For those who have not found Jesus Christ yet as Lord and Savior, we would ask, Father, that, at this moment, they may invite him in, that they may crown him Lord, that they may cast away all their foolish self-respect and receive that which he alone can provide – his own unsullied righteousness. We pray in his name, Amen.

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