

Empty Shells
Romans 2:17-29
2-15-2026

Commissioned in 1936, the RMS Queen Mary has been called the most awe-inspiring ocean-going vessel of her day. She was over 1000 feet long, weighed over 81,000 tons, and it displaced almost twice the tonnage of the Titanic. With 12 decks, they carried about 2000 passengers along with a crew of almost 1200. Basically, it was the size of a modern-day Aircraft Carrier.

In 1941, beds were added when she was converted into a troop transport and became the largest troop ship in the war, carrying almost 800,000 servicemen to and from Europe between 1941-1945, usually 10,000-15,000 per voyage. On one voyage alone, she set the record, which still stands today, for most passengers ever transported on a single voyage, over 16,000 troops. At one point, she was hit by a rogue wave over 90 feet high, and if she had rolled another 8 inches, experts believe she would have capsized. That event inspired the story of the Poseidon Adventure. The 1972 movie even used the Queen Mary as the setting for its filming.

Nicknamed the "Grey Ghost" because of her speed and grey camouflage paint, she was so fast that German U-boats were unable to keep up with her and therefore at times traveled out of convoy and without an escort.

In October 1942, she was steaming at 28 knots in a zig zag pattern while an escort, the light cruiser HMS Curacoa, whose best speed was 26 knots, tried to keep as close as possible. The two ships converged and the Queen Mary sliced right through and sank the Curacoa. But with 11,000 troops on board and the threat of German U-boats in the area, she was ordered not to stop and keep going which left it to her other escorts to conduct rescue operations. Of the 430 crew members of the HMS Curacoa, only 101 survived.

After the war, she was refurbished and returned to commercial use which continued until 1967, when she was sold to the city of Long Beach, California. I was only a child at the time, but I remember all the attention and what a big deal it was in the area when she was permanently docked only a few miles from where I grew up, fixed up and turned into a hotel and tourist attraction.

Part of the repair of the Queen Mary involved removing the three giant elliptical smokestacks for maintenance. Each one was 36 feet long, 23 feet wide, and ranged from 62 to 70 feet in height and was made of sheets of steel over 1 inch thick

To put that in perspective. It is about 36 feet from the back wall to where I am standing. From floor to the highest point of our ceiling is about 23 feet. And from left to right is almost 60 feet. So basically, laid on their side, each one would be about the size of this sanctuary.

During her 30 years of service, at least 30 coats of paint had been applied to the massive smokestacks which then formed a solid shell around the steel interior. As they removed them and placed them on the docks, all three crumbled. Over the years, the thick steel they were made of, had rusted away leaving nothing but empty shells.

Appearances can be deceiving
the external appearance was hiding the internal reality

they had become all form without substance

Jesus confronted a similar reality in Matthew 23 when he entered Jerusalem

There were many who looked good on the outside, used the right words, made the correct offerings and sacrifices, performed all the right rituals at the right times.

They gave the appearance of being clean and shiny and solid, leaving the impression of honoring God. But they had become like those smokestacks, only an empty shell. Form without substance.

The word Jesus used to describe them was a Greek word originally used in the theater

Actors would come out on stage wearing masks to fill a role, pretending to be something they weren't. The Greeks called them hypocrites.

6 times in Matthew 23 Jesus used that word to refer to those whose religious faith had become just an empty shell.

He said they were nothing but play actors, merely filling a role and pretending to be something they weren't

He accused them of appearing righteous but were actually filled with wickedness.

concerned not with what God thought of them but how they looked to the people around them and what others thought of them.

It was all for show!

They had become like those smokestacks

This was a concern Paul had for some in the church at Rome which he addresses at the end of chapter 2 of Romans.

verse 17 begins,

“Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God;” (Romans 2:17)

Here he brings up the three things which the Jewish believers there were especially proud of

1. The Jewish people may have been despised and persecuted by many, but they were extremely proud of their heritage
 - They were the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and therefore heirs to the Promise of God
 - They were people of the Exodus whom God delivered from slavery in Egypt when he sent the 10 plagues and parted the Red Sea
 - they were led by Moses during their 40 years of wandering through the wilderness with the manna from heaven to feed them and the cloud to guide them by day and the pillar of fire by night
 - And they were the nation built by David and Solomon

These weren't just stories from their past but central to their identity.

They are what came to define them as a people

It was a proud heritage

In their way of looking at the world, because of their heritage, there were Jews and there was everyone else, which meant they were special.

2. They were also proud of the Law, given to them by God himself at Mount Sinai

This is something no other people could claim

The law was the foundation upon which their society was built, guiding their actions and relationships, defining their values and understanding of right and wrong

It set them apart from all other people and nations.

3. And they were especially proud of their covenant relationship with God

Of all the people on earth, God chose them to be His people, and as Paul says here, they bragged about it

It meant they were special, his chosen ones, scripture even refers to them as God's treasured possession And God gave them the practice of circumcision to serve as a constant reminder of this

So, they had heritage to take pride in.

They had laws to guide their behavior and define their morals which set them apart from all other nations.

And they had circumcision as a testimony and reminder of their covenant relationship with God, and special status as His chosen people.

It was these three: heritage, morals, and covenant relationship which formed the foundation of their faith.

But over time, each became an end in itself

- Because they were children of Abraham, they came to think that Gods promises were theirs by right
- Because God had given them his law, they began to consider themselves morally superior to all the other nations
- And because they had circumcision as a sign of their relationship with God

regardless of how they lived or what they did, they believed they would always remain His chosen people

judgement, they believed, was reserved for everyone else

These three came to form the shell of their religion, but like those smokestacks from the Queen Mary, time had rusted away the substance and true significance of what they pointed to.

Form without substance

In Matthew 23 Jesus said they had become like dishes that were clean on the outside but filthy on the inside

Then he went even farther, calling them whitewashed tombs, they may have looked good and clean on the outside but inside were filled with dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, he said, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but, on the inside, you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness (Matthew 23)

Merely empty shells

Appearances can be deceiving

Paul described their pride in verses 18-20 when he wrote,

“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 infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—” (Romans 2:18–20)

They forgot, as we sometime might, that Gods call is not primarily for privilege but for responsibility. Not just blessing, but also service.

“through you,” God said, “all the nations on earth are to be blessed.”

And in failing to be a blessing, they were in danger of becoming a curse instead.

When we forget why we are called and start feeling entitled. Looking down instead of reaching out in grace to those we label sinners, we too are in danger of becoming a curse rather than a blessing

- Law then, can become an end in itself and turn to legalism by which to judge and condemn and accuse others
- Appreciation and pride in all Christ has done for us, can turn to hypocrisy, arrogance, and even a belittling triumphalism towards those Christ also died to save
- and the new covenant we enjoy in Christ can become mere formality and a coverup for our own sin.

This holding others to a standard we fail to live up to ourselves, condemning others while ignoring our own shortcomings, that’s what we see here as Paul continues

“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? You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?” (Romans 2:21–23)

As someone wrote, **“Those who take the meat from the table, teach contentment. Those for whom the taxes are destined, demand sacrifice. Those who eat their fill, speak to the hungry of wonderful times to come. Those who lead the country into the abyss, call ruling too difficult for ordinary men.”**

And the natural consequence of this is stated here in verse 24,

“As it is written: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.””

The very ones who need him most reject him because of what they see and hear and experience at the hands of his followers.

To blaspheme means his name becomes a curse and spoken against, something maligned and reviled, made fun of and ridiculed

What an indictment of those who weren’t living up to what they were preaching and professing. The people in Rome wouldn’t take God seriously if they didn’t see anything in Gods people to take seriously.

THIS SHOULD SERVE AS A DIRE WARNING FOR US AS WELL.

if we take an honest look at how too many view and treat the name of our lord today, it should give the church pause to question if maybe we are to blame for some of it.

I find it painful sometimes to listen and read what some in the Christian world are saying and doing. Because what I hear far too frequently on Christian TV and radio, Christian podcasts and from far too many preachers, what I read in far too many Christian books and articles and web pages, is merely a mirror of the rest of society, acting like just another special interest group filled with just as much condemnation towards others and other viewpoints, just as much contempt and snide remarks made about and towards those they don't agree with or like, and perhaps even more partisanship and divisiveness and disparaging remarks made about others, then the people in the world around us.

Maybe in overzealousness, we have become part of the problem more conformed to the world than transformed by the renewing of our mind, as Paul will write in Romans 12.

With the consequence that because of us, the name of Christ is blasphemed out there in the world where he's needed most

How can we expect the world to accept our savior if we are no different, if we treat others and speak about others no differently than the world at large does

We are Christ's representatives, his ambassadors. Paul calls us in the book of 1 Corinthians. Our lives and words and actions are to bear witness to him and God's love for all people regardless of who they are.

In Ephesians 2 Paul said Jesus has broken down the barriers and dividing wall of hostility in order to bring us together and create in himself one body.

When Jesus saves us, he sends us into our world to become part of the solution in bringing people together and seeking to end division and displaying the grace of God.

Pointing people towards Christ not turning them off to Him.

Paul concludes this section

“Circumcision has value if you observe the law, Paul continues, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. If those who are not circumcised keep the law’s requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? 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. A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man’s praise is not from men, but from God.” (Romans 2:25–29)

It's not the act but the heart which matters most to God!

Are we becoming more like Jesus, pointing people to God or turning them away through our words and actions?

Are we expressing love for the things and values of this world or for our God as seen through acts of love and compassion towards those in need, which is how Jesus defined the greatest commandment.

Is our faith in outward ceremony or an inward reality?
Form or substance?
Merely an empty shell or true substance?

We may not reject God as those described in Romans 1
But we must be careful we don't grow cold to him over time as described in chapter 2
Because we are focusing on externals like heritage and law and circumcision or baptism instead of what they represent; A living vibrant relationship with the God who created and cares for us.

Don't let the affection for things replace your affection for God

I read of a man named Brighton. He was pompous and meticulous about his appearance and very conscious of his public image. Very careful to be seen obeying all the rules and laws of society. He was also a very religious man who belonged to the most prestigious church in town. Over time he became increasingly bothered by the behavior of the boys in his church so decided that he would straighten them out and teach their Jr. High Sunday School class. On the first Sunday of the new church year, he decided he would begin by teaching the boys the importance of living the Christian life. So he started by asking them this question. Why do people call me a Christian? After an awkward pause, one of the boys spoke up and said, "Maybe it's because they don't know you."

Jesus said the entire law could be summed up in loving God with all our heart and soul and strength and the way we do this, he said, is by loving our neighbor as ourself
Then he defined our neighbor as the person in need, regardless of who they are or where they come from or look like

Like the Jewish believers Paul addresses here, we need to be careful we don't become so familiar with our relationship with God, his word and our rituals, that we start to take them for granted.
A mere shell of what they were
Form without substance

The just shall live by their faith, Paul had said in chapter 1:17

Francis Bacon – It's not what men eat but what they digest that makes them strong; not what we gain but what we save that makes us rich; not what we read but what we remember that makes us learned; not what we preach or pray but what we practice and believe that makes us Christian.

Appearances can be deceiving
We must not become like the Queen Mary, we can just keep putting another coat of paint on our lives to keep up appearances without doing anything to what is inside of us so long as we look good.

The issue is not how we appear and look like but what we are underneath that truly matters
What's below the surface of your life?
If all the coats of good works and religious activity were stripped away, would there be steel or rust underneath?