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RELIGION CAN'T SAVE YOU

Romans 4:9-15

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Romans Lesson 22

Religion Can't Save You Romans 4:9-15

If you've been tracking with this series in Romans, you may be getting to the point where you're thinking, "Why does Paul keep hammering on the truth that God's righteousness is credited to us by faith alone?" How many times does he need to say it? He states it in Romans 3:22, "even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." He hits it again in 3:26, "so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." (To be the justifier means to declare righteous the one who has faith in Jesus.) He hammers it again in 3:28, "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law."

He keeps going in 4:3 (citing Gen. 15:6): "Abraham believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness." In case we missed it, he repeats it in 4:5: "But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness." If you still didn't get it, he comes at it again in 4:6, "just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works." Not done yet, he says it again (4:8), "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account" ("credits" and "take into account" both come from the same Greek word).

But he still isn't done! He anticipates the reaction of religious Jews who will still be thinking, "Yes, God credits righteousness by faith, but it is only for the *circumcised* who believe, not for uncircumcised Gentiles." So in 4:9-12, he proves from the Old Testament that God credited righteousness to Abraham by faith while he was still uncircumcised. In proving this, he relentlessly beats the same drum. In 4:9, he cites again Genesis 15:6, "Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness." In 4:10, he insists that it was credited to him while he was still uncircumcised. In 4:11, he repeats that the uncircumcised who believe will have righteousness credited to them. And in 4:12 he applies it to the circumcised Jews: They, too, must follow in the steps of the faith of Abraham which he had while he was still uncircumcised.

But Paul anticipates another objection from religious Jews: "Surely we become heirs of God's promises to Abraham through the Law. Gentiles must keep the Law to come under these blessings." This was the teaching of the Judaizers, who plagued Paul's ministry (Acts 15:1, 5; Galatians). But Paul insists that the true heirs of the promises to Abraham are not those who are of the Law, but rather those who are of faith. He sums this up in 4:16 (which we will examine in more detail next time): "For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all."

So why does Paul keep hammering on this truth that God's righteousness is credited to us by faith alone? I think it's because he knows how deeply embedded in the fallen human heart is the idea that we can do something to commend ourselves to God. The last two millennia of human history prove him to be right. All religions, including the major ones that go under the label of "Christian," are works oriented. They teach what Paul explicitly and repeatedly denies here, that at least in part, we are saved by keeping religious rituals and by our good deeds.

For example, at the Council of Trent (in 1547), the Roman Catholic Church responded to the Protestant Reformation, including the doctrine of justification by faith alone. The Canons and Decrees of Trent represent the official teaching of the Catholic Church to this day. The Second Vatican Council in the 1960's declared these doctrines "irreformable." The Council of Trent did not deny that we are saved by God's grace through faith. But it added works to faith by combining justification (right standing with God) with sanctification (our growth in holiness subsequent to being justified) and by making justification a process that depends in part on our good works. To quote:

If any one saith, that by faith alone the impious is justified, in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification, ... let him be anathema. (Session 6, Canon 9, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* [Baker], 2:112.)

If any one saith, that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which remits sins for Christ's sake; or, that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified: let him be anathema. (Session 6, Canon 12, in Schaff, 2:113.)

If any one saith, that the justice received is not preserved and also increased before God through good works; but that the said works are merely the fruits and signs of Justification obtained, but not a cause of the increase thereof: let him be anathema. (Session 6, Canon 24, in Schaff, 2:115.)

If any one saith, that, after the grace of Justification has been received, to every penitent sinner the guilt is remitted, and the debt of eternal punishment is blotted out in such wise that there remains not any debt of temporal punishment to be discharged either in this world, or in the next in Purgatory, before the entrance to the kingdom of heaven can be opened [to him]: let him be anathema. (Session 6, Canon 30, in Schaff, 2:117.)

In other words, the Roman Catholic Church declares that we are justified before God by grace through faith, but not through faith *alone*. We must add our good works to that faith in order to obtain, preserve, and increase our right standing before God. This process is not completed at the initial point of faith in Christ, and not even in this life, but only, hopefully, in Purgatory. Thus the Catholic Church denies the sufficiency of the guilty sinner's faith in Christ's sacrifice as the means of right standing with God. (See *Justification by Faith Alone* [Soli Deo Gloria], ed. by Don Kistler, especially pp. 7-14, by John MacArthur, Jr.)

I do not point out these things to be unkind to Roman Catholics. Quite the contrary, I say it because I care deeply that Catholics come to understand what Paul teaches about this most crucial matter of how a person gets right with God. And, even if you are not from a Catholic background, because of the fall you are prone to trust in your religious activities and your good works as the basis of your standing before God. But Paul wants you to see that ...

Salvation does not come through religious rituals or the Law, but through God crediting righteousness through faith alone.

“This blessing” (4:9) refers to the blessing of salvation, of God not counting our sins against us (4:7-8). First, Paul shows that Abraham was not justified *after* he was circumcised, but *before*.

1. The blessing of salvation does not come through keeping religious rituals, but through God crediting righteousness to us through faith alone (4:9-12).

We can apply this to any religious rituals, such as baptism, communion, going to mass, praying the rosary, or whatever. We can sum up Paul’s flow of thought under two headings:

- A. God credits righteousness to the ungodly sinner who believes in Jesus Christ.

This is the shocking point that Paul makes in 4:5, “But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.” As I said when we studied that verse, most people would assume that it should read, “But to the one who tries hard and believes in Him who justifies all good people, his faith is credited as righteousness.” But Paul specifically states that on the one hand, this person isn’t trying hard; he does *not work*. On the other hand, he isn’t described as a good person, but rather as *ungodly*. He isn’t a religious person who tries to obey God. He isn’t a person who devotes his life to serving the poor. He isn’t a person who never deliberately hurt anyone. He is *ungodly*. God justifies the *ungodly* sinner who believes in Jesus!

The Jews viewed Gentiles as ungodly, but they viewed themselves as godly people. Circumcision was the main religious ritual that distinguished them from the “Gentile dogs.” When Abraham was 99 years-old, God commanded him to circumcise himself and all the males in his household. He extended that command for all Jewish baby boys throughout all generations, that they be circumcised on the eighth day. It was the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham (Gen. 17:11-12).

But Paul here points out a simple fact of Old Testament chronology: God’s command to Abraham to be circumcised happened at least 14 years after the incident in Genesis 15:6 where God credited Abraham’s faith to him as righteousness. Thus Abraham was in effect still an uncircumcised Gentile! So Paul effectively turns the tables on the Jews who argued for circumcision as essen-

tial for salvation. He is saying that it is not for the Gentiles to enter through the gate of Jewish circumcision, but rather for the Jews to enter through the gate of Gentile faith apart from circumcision (Frederic Godet, *Commentary on Romans* [Kregel], p. 174)!

Or, to put it in more modern terms, you do not get saved (or justified) by being baptized (whether as an infant or an adult) or by taking communion. You do not get saved by going to church or by faithfully saying your prayers or by doing penance. Rather, you get saved when God credits the very righteousness of Christ to you the instant that you believe in Him. Salvation does not come through the performance of any religious rituals, but only through faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:25).

Well then, what is the role of religious rituals? Are they worthless? Should we just forget about them? No,

- B. Religious rituals serve as signs and seals of the reality that comes through faith in Christ.

Paul (4:11) refers to circumcision as both a sign and a seal of the righteousness of the faith that Abraham had while uncircumcised. This makes him “the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them.”

A *sign* is not the real thing, but it points to it. A sign that says “Flagstaff, 10 miles” is not the actual city, but it points you to it. Circumcision was a physical sign in every Jewish man’s flesh that pointed to the fact that he belonged to God. He was in covenant with God and God’s people. He was separated to God through the shedding of blood. It was a sign of purification from the flesh, so that both Moses (Deut. 10:16) and the prophets (Jer. 4:4) exhorted Israel spiritually to circumcise their hearts.

As Christians, baptism is a sign that your sins have been washed away through faith in Christ (Acts 22:16). It pictures the truth that you have been identified completely (immersed) with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-4). The Lord’s Supper is a sign of the New Covenant (1 Cor. 11:25), showing that you are a partaker in Christ’s sacrificial death on your behalf. The sign is not the reality, but it points to the reality. The reality is God’s promise to forgive all our sins and impute Christ’s

righteousness to our account by faith alone. The “ritual” is a sign of the reality. If you don’t have the reality, the ritual is worthless.

Also, Paul refers to circumcision as a *seal*. A seal authenticates or attests to the reality of something. A notary’s seal on a document attests that it is the real thing. Circumcision attested to the reality of Abraham’s previous faith that justified him and to God’s covenant with him. But it was the faith that justified, not the act of circumcision. In 4:12, Paul applies this to the Jews, but then narrows it by saying that it does not apply to all Jews, but only to those “who also follow in the steps of the faith” of Abraham. He almost twists the knife when he adds, “which he had while uncircumcised.” He is saying that whether you are a Gentile or a Jew, the key thing is to believe God’s promise to justify the ungodly. The rituals follow as signs and seals, but the reality is through faith alone.

What then is the benefit of religious “rituals,” such as baptism and communion? Should we do them at all? Yes, because Scripture commands us to do them. But they should only be done *after* you have put your trust in Christ as your righteousness. They then become a sign pointing to that reality and a seal that attests to your faith in Christ.

I can only briefly deal with the fact that those who argue for infant baptism point to Romans 4:11 as a key verse. They argue that although for Abraham circumcision pointed back to his previous faith, for Abraham’s descendants, it was done for them as infants and thus pointed ahead to the faith they later would exercise. They argue that baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign of the covenant. Thus we should baptize infants.

How do we answer this? (For a more thorough treatment, see my sermon, “Why We Do Not Baptize Infants,” 9/8/96, on fcfonline.org). But, briefly: First, there is no New Testament example or command to baptize infants. Rather, every mention of baptism in the New Testament shows that it is the appropriate response to saving faith, not the precursor of it. Also, while the New Testament shows some correspondence between circumcision and baptism (Col. 2:11-12), it explicitly mentions faith in that context. It is an argument from silence, but it is a loud silence when in the many New Testament discussions about circumcision, there is absolutely no reference to it now being replaced by baptism.

There are some significant differences between circumcision and baptism. But even if we grant the parallels, then just as circumcision was administered to the physical descendants of Abraham in the age of type, so baptism ought to be administered to the spiritual descendants of Abraham in the age of fulfillment, namely, to believers. Old Testament Israel consisted of the physical descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob, and thus the sign was given to show that the males were children of the covenant. But the New Testament church consists of those who are the spiritual children of Abraham through faith in Christ (Gal. 3:7). Thus baptism should only be administered to those who give a clear profession of faith in Christ.

I should also point out that while some denominations (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran) teach that baptism imparts regeneration to infants, others that practice infant baptism (Presbyterians, the Reformed Church, and Methodists) do not. But I argue that even if a church denies that it imparts regeneration, to baptize infants is potentially damaging in that it later gives them false assurance that they are right with God through a ritual. But we are right with God through faith in Christ alone. (See also, John Piper, "How do Circumcision and Baptism Correspond?" on DesiringGod.org.)

But Paul anticipates that his Jewish readers will bring up the Law. Surely Paul wouldn't throw out God's Law! Don't the Gentiles have to keep the Law in order to call Abraham their father?

2. The blessing of salvation does not come through keeping the Law, but through God crediting righteousness to us through faith alone (4:13-15).

The Jews would have not restricted the obedience which they thought necessary for salvation to circumcision, but would have expanded it to the whole Law (Acts 15:5). Paul could have countered their argument, as he does in Galatians 3:17, by showing that the Law, which came 430 years after the promise to Abraham, does not invalidate the previous covenant. But instead, he limits himself here to the argument of Galatians 3:18, that the concept of a covenant promise is fundamentally opposed to the concept of the Law.

He states the principle in 4:13: "For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith." Then he explains (4:14), "For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified." Thus he is saying,

- A. If you seek to be justified by keeping the Law, you make faith void and you nullify God's promises (4:14).

The principle of receiving a gift by faith is the opposite of receiving a reward that you work for (Rom. 3:24; 4:4). If you offer me a gift and I say, "Let me pay you back by working for it," I have turned the gift into something that I owe you or you end up owing me. God promises to justify the ungodly person who does not deserve it, but who receives it freely by His grace. If you mix human works with God's grace, then grace is no longer grace. The promise of salvation as a free gift received by faith has been nullified and turned into a debt for payment of services rendered.

- B. If you seek to be justified by keeping the Law, rather than gaining the blessing of salvation you actually incur God's wrath (4:15).

In 4:15, Paul explains why the attempt to gain salvation by the Law is doomed to fail: "for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there is no violation." The Law brings wrath because no one can keep it perfectly. To gain acceptance with God by keeping the Law, you have to keep it perfectly (James 2:10). Any failure makes you liable for God's judgment. The second phrase does not mean that there is no sin when there is no law. As Paul previously stated, the Gentile who did not know the explicit commands of God is guilty of violating his own conscience (Rom. 2:14-15). But the Jew who knows the Law and violates it is going against what he explicitly knows to be right. The Law shows us what sin is (Rom. 7:7). Thus to know the Law and violate it incurs God's wrath to a greater degree than not to know the Law at all.

Also, note that there are two and only two possible eternal futures for every person: either you are an heir of the world as a true descendant of Abraham (4:13) or you are an heir of wrath as one who sought to be right with God by keeping the Law (4:15).

The phrase, "heir of the world," does not occur in those exact words anywhere in God's promises to Abraham. Rather, Paul is probably summing up God's promises that Abraham would have a large number of descendants from many nations (Gen. 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 17:4-6, 16-20; 22:17); that he would possess the land (Gen. 13:15-17; 15:12-21; 17:8); and that he would be the channel of blessing "all the peoples of the earth" (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 274). Jesus Christ is the final "seed" ("descendant") of Abraham (Gal. 3:16). If we are in Christ through faith, then we are fellow heirs with Him (Rom. 8:17; Eph. 3:6). As Paul puts it (Gal. 3:29), "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise."

Conclusion

In verse 9, as I said, "this blessing" refers to the blessing that Paul has enumerated from Psalm 32 (in Rom. 4:7-8), namely, the blessing of knowing that your lawless deeds have been forgiven, that your sins have been covered, and that God will not take your sins into account. Do you want that blessing?

You won't get it by being born into a Christian home or by faithful attendance at a Christian church. You won't get it by being baptized and partaking of communion. You won't get the blessing of forgiveness by doing penance or devoting yourself to sacrificial service to the poor. In short, you won't get the blessing of salvation through religious rituals or by keeping the Law. Rather, God forgives all our sins and credits Christ's righteousness to us if we put our faith in Jesus and His shed blood. Religion can't save you, but Jesus can. Trust in Him and instantly you become an heir of God's promise of eternal life as His free gift!

Application Questions

1. Some say that the doctrine of justification by faith alone should be set aside so that Protestants and Catholics can come together in the many areas where they agree. Your thoughts?
2. Discuss: Do religious “rituals” convey grace to all who participate or only to those who participate in faith?
3. Do you agree that infant baptism is potentially damaging? Why/why not?
4. Why is the concept of approaching God by keeping the Law (or any good works) fundamentally opposed to “the righteousness of faith”?

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