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RITUAL VERSUS REALITY

Romans 2:25-29

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Romans, Lesson 13

Ritual Versus Reality Romans 2:25-29

Who are the most difficult people to reach with the gospel? I realize that only God can save a soul and that nothing is too difficult for Him. But, from a human standpoint, some types of people seem to be more difficult to bring to saving faith than others are (Luke 18:24-27). The Bible shows us that the most difficult people to reach are religious people who trust in their religion. They relish their rituals and religious traditions. They don't see their need for a Savior from sin because they view themselves as pretty good people. They think they are right with God because of their religious performance (Luke 18:11-12).

They may be Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Baha'i, Mormon, Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant. They can even be Baptists! They think that their performance of their religious rituals will somehow commend them to God. But they lack reality with the living God on the heart level.

Paul knew that the most difficult people to reach with the gospel were not the pagans whom he described in Romans 1:18-32. Like Matthew or Zaccheus (Luke 5:27-32; 19:1-10), the tax collectors, or like the sinful woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears (Luke 7:36-50), many obviously wicked people know that they are sinners. They may not be sure that God could ever forgive them. But they welcome that news when they hear it.

But the religious Jews didn't see themselves as sinners and so they didn't see any need for a Savior. They trusted in their Jewishness, in their possession of God's Law, and in their conformity to the prescribed religious rituals, especially circumcision. Why did they need the gospel? Why did they need to get right with God? Didn't Paul know what kind of people they were?

Yes, Paul knew. He was one of them. At one time, he had taken great pride in his circumcision, his Jewishness, and his zeal for the Jewish religion (Phil. 3:4-6). But he didn't know Christ. He didn't have his sins forgiven. He wasn't reconciled to God. So now

he wants his fellow Jews who trusted in their religious rituals to see their need for the gospel. So he hits them with what would have been a shocking argument: the obedient Gentile will fare better on judgment day than the disobedient Jew. Paul is trying to strip every religious person of his religiosity as the basis for acceptance with God, so that he will be driven to the cross of Christ for mercy. He wants us to see that...

Reality with God is not a matter of outward conformity to religious rituals, but rather of obedience that results from God changing your heart.

Paul here hits the first and third reasons why the Jew would claim to have exemption from judgment. The first was, "I am a Jew, a son of Abraham." Second, "We have the Law given to our chosen nation." (Paul dealt with that in 2:17-24.) Third, "I have been circumcised, unlike those unclean Gentiles." But Paul shows that being true Jew and being truly circumcised are not outward matters, but matters of the heart.

1. Reality with God is not a matter of outward conformity to religious rituals (2:25).

"For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision" (2:25).

God instituted the practice of circumcision (the removal of the male foreskin) as a sign of His covenant with Abraham, over 500 years before He gave Moses the Law (see Genesis 17). It symbolized moral purity and separation from the world unto God. Under the Law of Moses, it became a sign of membership in the covenant community. So as a God-ordained ritual, circumcision was of value to the Jews as a reminder of their covenant relationship to God and of the need to be morally set apart to God.

When Paul says that circumcision is of value, he is speaking to the Jews as Jews. When he addresses those who are in Christ, he says (Gal. 5:6), "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love." Circumcision was a Jewish sign of the covenant that ended when Jesus instituted the new covenant. Except for hygienic reasons, it holds no value for believers in Christ.

Also, when Paul says, “circumcision is of value if you practice the Law,” I do not understand him to mean, “if you practice the Law *perfectly*.” Some think that when Paul mentions keeping the Law in this section (2:25, 26, 27), he is speaking hypothetically of perfect obedience, which no one can do. But I understand him to be referring to a lifestyle of obedience to God’s Law, which is possible for those who have been born again (Luke 1:6; 2:25). For such Jews before the cross, circumcision was of value.

But the perpetual danger of religious rituals, even of those that God commands, is that they become external only. Thus from the earliest times Moses exhorted Israel (Deut. 10:16), “So circumcise your heart. . . .” Later (Deut. 30:6), he again gave the ritual a spiritual meaning when he promised, “The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.” Later, the prophet Jeremiah preached with similar imagery (Jer. 4:4), “Circumcise yourselves to the Lord and remove the foreskins of your heart, men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, or else My wrath will go forth like fire and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds.”

Moses and Jeremiah were making the point that the physical ritual of circumcision had to be accompanied by its spiritual meaning, namely, holiness and obedience to God on the heart level. Without such reality with God, the ritual had lost its essential meaning and was virtually worthless.

But by Paul’s day, the Jews had come to put great stock in the ritual itself. Several of the Jewish rabbis taught that no circumcised man will go to hell (Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 63). So Paul is standing in line with Moses and Jeremiah when he tells the Jews that if they do not obey God’s Law, their “circumcision has become uncircumcision.” They might as well be pagan Gentiles if they lived in disobedience to God. Their circumcision meant nothing.

How do we apply Paul’s words to Christian “rituals”? Do the rituals of the ancient Christian church have spiritual value for us today? Many who were raised in evangelical circles have moved to Episcopal, Roman Catholic, or Orthodox churches because they

felt that the rituals and liturgy made them feel closer to God. Are we missing something if we abandon these rituals?

First, we need to be clear that there are only two “rituals” (or “sacraments” or, better, “ordinances”) prescribed in the New Testament: baptism and communion. To add other rituals, or to invest those two rituals with meaning that is not taught in the New Testament, is to worship God falsely. In New Testament terms, every believer is a priest (1 Pet. 2:9), and so we do not need a human priest, dressed in special robes and vestments, offering the sacrifice of the mass or performing rituals on our behalf. Jesus is our high priest and He offered Himself as the complete and final sacrifice for our sins (Heb. 9:11-14; 10:1-14).

Also, the New Testament is clear that being baptized or partaking of communion are of no spiritual value, unless you do them out of faith in Christ. Baptism, whether performed on infants (which I believe is wrong) or on those old enough to understand what it means, does not convey salvation or forgiveness of sins. Neither does partaking of the Lord’s Supper. If the baptized person acts in obedience to Christ as a confession of saving faith in Christ, then baptism is of great value. If we partake of the Lord’s Supper as a reminder of His death on our behalf and of all that that means to us, it, too, is of great value. We should not minimize or abandon these rituals. But there is no spiritual benefit conveyed just by going through these religious rituals, apart from reality with God through faith in Christ. So Paul’s first point is that reality with God is not a matter of outward conformity to religious rituals.

2. Reality with God is a matter of obedience that results from God changing your heart (2:26-29).

At this point, Paul would have shocked his Jewish readers. He makes the point that...

A. God regards obedience that results from a changed heart as righteous, apart from religious ritual (2:26-27).

Paul writes (2:26-27), “So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law?”

He means, "If a Gentile obeys the moral requirements of God's Law, God will count him as righteous, even though he is uncircumcised!" And, even more shocking, "The obedient, but uncircumcised Gentile some day will condemn you who have the written Law and have been circumcised, but are disobedient to that Law." He does not mean that obedient Gentiles literally will act as judges against the Jews, but rather that they will "be a witness for the prosecution in the sense that the Gentiles' obedience will be evidence of what the Jew ought to have been ..." (C. E. B. Cranfield, cited by Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], p. 139).

There is debate about who is the uncircumcised man who keeps the requirements of the Law. Is this merely hypothetical? Does Paul mean that no Gentile has ever kept the Law or could do it, but *if* he could, he would be counted as circumcised and thus condemn the Jew? Or, could Paul be referring to unsaved Gentiles like Cornelius (Acts 10), who were devout, God-fearing men? Or, is he referring to Gentiles who really do obey the Law because God has changed their hearts?

As I've already said, it seems to me that Paul is talking about genuinely converted Gentiles, who keep God's Law because God has circumcised their hearts through faith in Christ. Paul will explain this in verses 28 and 29, where he says that being a true Jew (which means, one who is in right relationship with God) is not a matter of external circumcision, but of internal circumcision of the heart, brought about by the Holy Spirit. Thomas Schreiner (who gives much more support for this point than I can cite here, *The Law and Its Fulfillment* [Baker], pp. 197-201), states (p. 198), "Paul's main point in this section is ... that no one can be saved and observe the law without the Holy Spirit. Those who have the Spirit are empowered to observe the law (8:4), but one only receives the Spirit by believing in Jesus, whom God has set forth as a propitiation for sin (3:21-26)."

So Paul's point in 2:26-27 is that God regards obedience that results from a changed heart as righteous, apart from keeping the external ritual of circumcision.

B. Reality with God depends on His Spirit changing your heart, not on the performance of religious rituals (2:28-29).

“For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God” (2:28-29).

Again, this would have been shocking to the Jew of Paul's day, who took great pride in being a circumcised son of Abraham. The Jews despised the “unclean” Gentiles and took great pride in their Jewish lineage and religious rituals. But they wrongly were concerned more about outward matters than about their hearts before God. As Jesus said (Matt. 23:25), they cleaned the outside of the cup, but inside they were full of sin. So Paul cuts through all of the external privileges and practices and says that the main thing in God's sight is not the outward, but the inward. Reality with God is a matter of the Holy Spirit changing your heart, not of your performing religious rituals.

Paul uses four somewhat overlapping contrasts to drive home this point: (1) not outward, but inward; (2) not the flesh, but the heart; (3) not the letter, but the Spirit; and, (4) praise not from men, but from God.

- (1) Reality with God is not an outward matter, but inward.

Jesus made this point in the Sermon on the Mount when He pointed out that you have committed murder in God's sight if you've been angry with your brother. You've committed adultery in God's sight if you've lusted in your heart after a woman, even if you've never touched her. God looks on the heart. You can impress people with polished prayers, powerful sermons, generous gifts to the church, and all sorts of religious activities. But all the while you're impressing people, God is looking at your heart. What was your motive when you did those things? And, what kinds of thoughts were you entertaining? You can take the communion elements while you're lusting after the girl sitting nearby or while you're angry with your mate. To have reality with God, you've got to focus on the inward. Of course, if you're right inwardly with God, it will express itself properly in outward deeds. But the outward must begin with the inward.

- (2) Reality with God is not a matter of the flesh, but of the heart.

Paul says (in line with Moses and Jeremiah) that true circumcision is not a matter of the flesh, but of the heart. This means that we must deal with sin on the heart or thought level. We must put to death or cut off the deeds of the flesh when they occur in our minds. Paul says (Rom. 8:12-13), "So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

This means that the second you are tempted, turn from it, cry out to God's Spirit for the strength to run from it, and fill your thoughts with Christ (Rom. 13:14; Col. 3:1-4). If you develop that habit, you will not fulfill the deeds of the flesh by outward sins.

- (3) Reality with God is not a matter of trying to keep the letter of the Law in your strength, but of God's Spirit changing your heart by faith in Christ.

In Ezekiel 36:25-27, God promised a spiritual revival for His sinning people: "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances." While those promises will still be fulfilled with the Jews in a future revival (Rom. 11:2-32), they also now apply to all who believe in Christ. Ezekiel was talking about the new birth, which Jesus told the religious Nicodemus he needed (John 3:1-16). Nicodemus' observance of religious rituals was not enough. He needed God's Spirit to give him a new heart by faith in Jesus' death on the cross for his sins.

The "letter-Spirit" contrast is a salvation-historical one (Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 142; Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 175). The letter refers to the past age of the Law and its many commandments. The problem was, the Law combined with sinful human flesh, resulted in disobedience and death (Rom. 7:5-6; 2 Cor. 3:3-11). The Law by itself did not give the

power to obey it. But now that God's Spirit has been poured out on His people and He has changed our hearts, we are able to obey God from the heart (Rom. 6:17; 8:1-4; 13). Reality with God means that His Spirit has changed your heart so that now you are able joyfully to obey Jesus Christ.

- (4) Reality with God means that you do not receive praise from men, but from God.

This refers ultimately to the rewards that we will receive from God when Christ returns. In 1 Corinthians 4:5, Paul says that when the Lord comes, He "will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God."

This means also that those whose hearts the Spirit has circumcised live with a new focus. Rather than seeking to impress others with their religious activities, as the Pharisees did, they seek to please God from the heart. Instead of focusing on what others think of us, we focus on what God thinks of us. As Paul said when he contrasted himself with the Judaizers, who focused on the ritual of physical circumcision (Phil. 3:3), "For we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh."

This final phrase, "his praise is not from men, but from God," is a word play that the Jews would have picked up on. Although Paul wrote in Greek, his Jewish readers would know that in Hebrew, *Jew* comes from *Judah*, meaning, *praise* (Gen. 29:35; 49:8). So Paul has a double meaning: "his *Judaism/praise* is not from men, but from God." In other words, the one who has experienced the circumcision of his heart by the Holy Spirit is the true Jew. He hasn't just gone through a religious ritual, but he is now pleasing God, who gave him a new heart through faith in Jesus Christ. He isn't practicing his religion to get the praise of men (Matt. 6:1-6). Rather, he lives before God, so that one day he will hear, "Well done." His praise will be from God.

Conclusion

If you had asked one of these religious Jews, "Are you going to heaven?" he would have been offended. He would have said, "Of course, I'm going to heaven!" If you had pressed him for the

reasons that he was going to heaven, he would have said, "I'm a Jew. I've been circumcised." In other words, he would have had absolute assurance of his salvation, but it was *false* assurance!

Why should God let you into heaven someday? "I was raised in a Christian home." That doesn't matter. "I believe in God and I've always gone to church." Nope! "But, years ago I invited Jesus to be my Savior and was baptized." But, has God changed your heart so that you now seek to love Him, obey Him, and please Him on the heart level? Do you live to know Christ more deeply? Are you growing in victory over the deeds of the flesh and in habitually displaying the fruit of the Spirit? If your honest answer is, "Well, not really," you may be into ritual, not reality with God.

In the fall of 1999, I stepped inside of the Orthodox Church at the town square in Timisoara, Romania. The architecture was beautiful. Icons were everywhere. Candles floating in water lit up the dimly lit sanctuary. My eye was drawn to a woman, seductively dressed, who was kneeling before an icon, praying with tears running down her cheeks. A priest with his full beard and long robe walked by and looked approvingly at her. I wanted to grab him by his robe and shout, "Tell her about the blood of Jesus that cleanses from all sin!" The woman was going through the prescribed religious rituals. Only God knows her heart, but my guess was, she didn't have the reality of knowing Jesus.

Reality with God is not a matter of going through religious rituals or of a general belief in God. Rather, reality with God means having a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. Reality with God means that He has changed your heart and you now see the evidence of that change by a lifestyle of obedience to His Word. Don't substitute religious ritualism for true spiritual reality with the living God! Following religious rituals has never saved anyone. True religion is a matter of God changing your heart.

Application Questions

1. How can we keep the biblically-prescribed “ritual” of communion from becoming a meaningless repetition? Are we free to abandon rituals that have lost their meaning?
2. Why does the fallen human heart gravitate towards ritual over reality? What are the spiritual benefits and dangers of rituals?
3. Jonathan Edwards’ thesis in *Religious Affections* was that “true religion, in great part, consists of holy affections.” How can we cultivate such “holy affections,” or heartfelt feelings?
4. Since the fallen human heart is deceitful (Jer. 17:9), how can we guard our hearts so that we walk in reality with God?

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