

ROMANS – LIVING BY FAITH
GOD’S RIGHTEOUSNESS & MAN’S REBELLION – Chapters 1-3

LESSON 9 – RITUAL AND REALITY – Romans 2:25-29

Have you ever heard someone say, “We’ve always done it that way?” That’s definitely a sign of tradition. If tradition is followed, it MUST reflect a genuine, Biblical principle or practice. It MUST be a visible sign of an invisible truth. In this last part of Romans 2, Paul shows us when religious rituals have meaning...and when they don’t.

Paul reminds all of his Roman readers that a religion without reality is not acceptable to God. Religious heritage doesn’t matter...religious claims don’t matter...
religious associations don’t matter.

The Jews, like so many religious people today, were confident they were right with God because they practiced their rituals. Using the Old Testament, Paul shows that simply following ritual will never make someone right with God.

The Impossibility of Ritual to Produce Reality

“Like so many in Christendom today who imagine themselves members of the church of Christ and heirs of heaven because of baptism in infancy, the Jews thought circumcision gave them special status with God. It is this idea...that a mere religious ordinance can profit the soul apart from a vital, personal, spiritual experience that Paul condemns.”

John Phillips

The Purpose of the Ritual

The rite of circumcision was instituted by God as a sign of His covenant with Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17:10-13). Circumcision was a sign of being part of the covenant community. Paul says in Romans 4:11 that circumcision in Abraham’s life was a seal of the righteousness he acquired by faith in God’s promises.

The Practice of the Ritual

Over time, more and more importance was placed on circumcision. It went from being practiced in the home in Israel to a ritual performed by a priest in the temple. It played an important role in identifying the males in Israel as part of God’s faithful within His covenant.

The Perversion of the Ritual

Circumcision eventually became more important in Israel than keeping the law. Many rabbis taught that every circumcised Jew would go to heaven and none would go to hell.

No outward ritual or act can have any value if it is not related to a dynamic personal relationship with Him. In our day, the error of the Jews has become our error. We count our church membership, our baptism, our denominational affiliation or any other list of things as proof that we are “Christian.” None of those outward signs have any meaning unless there is an inward reality.

The Paradox of the Ritual

Paul probably shocked the Roman Jews by what he wrote. In verse 26 he said that a person that doesn't follow any rituals might be more righteous than those totally devoted to them.

Paul is arguing that if a religious person lives in such a way that mocks the clear teaching of God's Word, they cancel out everything their rituals stand for. But a person whose heart is right with God and has never practiced any type of religious ritual, is actually enjoying all that those rituals stand for.

The Importance of Reality to Prove Ritual

The Outward Appearance

"Jewishness is not a matter of race at all; Jewishness has nothing to do with circumcision. Jewishness is a matter conduct. Paul was abolishing the very basis of Jewish thought. He was introducing a new concept which made Jewishness a thing available to every nation, a thing as wide as the earth itself."

William Barclay

"For he is not a Christian who is one outwardly, nor is that 'church membership' which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Christian who is one inwardly; and 'church membership' is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter, whose praise is not of men, but of God."

Donald Grey Barnhouse

The Inward Approval

This was not a new idea with Paul. The truth that circumcision did not make a man a Jew was as old as the prophets...

"Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer." Deuteronomy 10:16

In the New Testament, inward circumcision is also used to illustrate the reality of the Christian experience...

"In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ." Colossians 2:11

Paul reminds the Jews in this section of Romans that...

- Lineage will not save anyone...
- Ritual will not save anyone...

The Proper Place of Ritual Today

We actually need rituals. We can't live meaningful and productive lives without some sort of structure. So we join God's people at a certain time in a specific place. We get together and practice our rituals of worship.

It is extremely important to understand that without any real change of heart, we may still know a great deal of Christian truth...may be occupied with Christian work...and closely associated with Christian people...and all the while may be without that new life that comes from that personal, individual relationship with Him. The danger of this position is far greater than that of willful, deliberate sin. Jesus warned against the presumption that doing things will make us right with Him.

“Many will say to me on that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles? Then I will tell them plainly, I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!” Matthew 7:22-23

Did you know that the term Legalism is often heard in Christian circles but is most times misunderstood. Many people who are committed to faithful, spiritual practices and priorities are called legalistic. In reality, they're not; they're just faithful. Legalism is when doing a thing or things is elevated above the meaning and intent behind doing a thing or things. Those who are legalistic look for personal recognition or gain in doing the things they do as opposed to those who are faithful and realize their recognition and gain will come from Him.