

Judgment for the Religious Man

A Study on Romans 2:17-29

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In Romans 1:18-3:20, Paul showed all men to be sinners and guilty before a holy God, lacking any kind of righteousness that would make them acceptable before God and needing a spiritual righteousness that only Christ could give them. He proved the pagan Gentiles guilty before God because they had rejected the light God had given them and had broken their own self-made laws. He also proved the moral Jews and Gentiles guilty before God because they were self-righteous and were proud because they did not do the grosser sins of the pagans.

In Romans 2:17–3:8 Paul shows that the religious man is guilty before God. He uses the Jews as his prime example: they had the Mosaic Law and broke it, proving themselves sinners; they did not practice what they preached, they professed but did not possess; and they had outward form but no inward reality.

The context of this passage is about religious Jews, but its truths may be applied to any and all religious people. The word “religion,” in its narrowest sense, may be applied only to Christianity, for Christianity is the one true religion. However, in its broadest sense, religion refers to any works system whereby a person tries to gain merit before God. In this sense, religion is the enemy of Christianity.

Carl Marx said, “Religion is the opiate of the people!” With this statement I wholeheartedly agree. Ritual, ceremony, vanity, pride, etc., which characterize religious people, can certainly put them to sleep. But Christianity is not just a religion — it is a living, real, vital, and dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ. Religion is not just Mohammedanism, Confucianism, Zen Buddhism, etc. Religion can be seen in Judaism, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Fundamentalism — it is possible to have perfect doctrine and a putrid heart. There are many people today who are attached to form, ceremony, liturgy, and religious precepts and practices who are at the same time aliens to the grace of God. They have church without Christ; religion without regeneration; ritual without redemption from sin; outward liturgy without inward reality; and form of service without fear of God.

When God begins to probe the hearts of religious people, they begin to throw up the usual religious jargon about church, good works, baptism, etc. These are just smoke screens or excuses, for the real issue is Christ.

RELIGION BOASTS OF ITS CREEDS — Romans 2:17-18

“Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy boast of God, and knowest his will, and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law.” God chose the Jews as his people, gave them special revelation in the Mosaic Law, and separated them from all the nations of the earth. He did this out of his love and grace, and this should have humbled them. Instead, it made them extremely proud. The Jews became guilty of national pride.

There are many people today who plead their creeds when someone speaks to them about their personal relationship with Christ. They say, “I’m a Presbyterian,” or “I’m a Baptist,” or “I’m a Methodist.” Maybe they are hyper-spiritual and say, “I’m an independent!” Men are proud of their churches and their creeds. Some actually feel that God will accept them because they go to a particular church or hold to a certain theology. In his grace God has given a great background to many denominations — Latimer to the Anglicans, Wesley to the Methodists, Calvin to the Presbyterians, Luther to the Lutherans — but this is no cause for pride. The recitation of the Apostle’s Creed or the Lord’s Prayer, or the carrying of a respected reference Bible to church does not impress God. These things may fool men, but they do not fool God in the least. His question is always, “What effect does the truth have on you? You have knowledge, but what does it do to you? How does it affect you? Does it make you more rigid and unbending, more legalistic and demanding, or does it make you loving and honest and more compassionate for people?”

RELIGION BRAGS OF ITS GOOD WORKS — Romans 2:19-20

“And art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness, and instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, which hast the form of knowledge and of the truth in the law.” With the privileges given the Jews came certain responsibilities. The Jews were to take the knowledge of Jehovah God to others. They were to be guides, to give light, to instruct and to teach. Instead they took a “holier than thou” attitude, thought themselves better than Gentiles, and became sickeningly pious. They were proud of their position and good works. They had the outward form of the law and held it to the letter, but there was no inner reality of Jehovah God. The law was to point them to God and to Christ, but they stopped short at the facts of the law and did not know its reality. They had the law but no inward experience with God.

When presented with their need for Jesus Christ, many people today will talk about their church membership, show their baptismal certificate, say they are doing the best they can, talk about how nice they are to others, or enumerate how many times they go to church. This attitude shows that they are guilty of pride. Some in Fundamentalist circles today feel

they have all the truth and everyone else is apostate. They keep, or think they keep, the Bible to the letter, but they are hard, cold, cantankerous, divisive, and proud. They separate themselves from anyone who does not think just like they do! I rather think that many Fundamentalist churches are filled with people who hold the law to the letter, but have no inner reality of Christ. We are told in 2 Timothy 3:5 that in the last days of the church before the Lord returns, men will have a form of godliness but deny the power thereof. There may be an outward show of Christianity with no inner reality!

RELIGION IS HYPOCRITICAL — Romans 2:21-23

Paul's point was that the Jews were guilty of the very things they preached against. He asked five questions, all anticipating an affirmative answer. The glaring inconsistency between profession and practice is brought out in these verses:

“Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself?” Yes, they did not teach themselves! The Jews, thinking themselves teachers, actually needed to learn and practice the law they were teaching others.

“Thou that preachest a man should not steal, dost thou steal?” Yes, they stole as well. Stealing takes many different forms. It involves taking objects, taking time, and failing to give liberally of one's monies. A religious person might not rob a bank, but still fail to give his money liberally to the Lord's work.

“Thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery?” Yes! Adultery is committed with the mind as well as the body: “But I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matt. 5:28). I fear many ministers and priests are guilty of adultery!

“Thou that abhorrest idols, dost thou commit sacrilege?” Yes! The Jews, by and large, hated idolatry, but they still robbed God of his honor by disobeying him. Men today go piously to church on Sunday and live like the devil the other six days of the week, making a mockery of God.

“Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God?” Yes! The Jews held to the law, but continually broke it by their attitudes and actions, proving themselves guilty sinners before God.

Paul 's point is that it is neither the possession nor the exposition of the law that counts, but the application of it. Many people go to church and soak in the message, but do nothing with it. This is religion at its best!

RELIGION BRINGS DISGRACE TO GOD — Romans 2:24

“For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you, as it is written.” Because of the hypocritical acts of the Jews, the name of God was mocked among the Gentiles. They concluded that the God of the Jews was like the Jews themselves, and so they wanted nothing to do with Jehovah. Religious people actually hurt the cause of Christ. In their colonial exploitation, men have conquered, enslaved, starved, dominated, and murdered other people, and have done it in the name of God. During the Spanish Inquisition, multiplied thousands were slaughtered by the Roman Catholic Church in the name of Christ. The squabbling and divisiveness of modern Fundamentalists makes people want to avoid them. People look at the lives of many who profess Christ and want no part of it. People profess more than they possess.

RELIGION CLINGS TO OUTWARD RITUAL — Romans 2:25-29

In this section, Paul deals with the subject of circumcision and strips the Jews of their last refuge. They thought that the physical sign of circumcision, symbolizing membership in national Israel, guaranteed their salvation. Paul showed that true circumcision is of the heart (spiritual), and that physical circumcision is only an outward symbol which is of no effect without the spiritual reality.

“For circumcision verily profiteth, if thou keep the law: but if thou be a breaker of the law, thy circumcision is made uncircumcision. Therefore if the uncircumcision keep the righteousness of the law, shall not his uncircumcision be counted for circumcision? And shall not uncircumcision which is by nature, if it fulfil the law, judge thee, who by the letter and circumcision dost transgress the law?” Circumcision was only profitable for a Jew if he had the inward reality and desired to keep the law. Such a desire could only come if one had been regenerated. Those who kept the law of conscience, without the physical sign of circumcision, would actually judge the Jews who had the Mosaic Law and did not keep it. What a blow to the pride of Jews to think that Gentiles could judge them!

“For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.” The thing that really matters is a faith relationship towards God. It is an attitude of faith; it is of the

heart, not the flesh. Men should never trust in outward ritual or ordinances for salvation. Ritual without regeneration of the heart is only religion. True ritual is actions instead of words. If there is no heart meaning, ritual is cold, hard and lifeless.

CONCLUSION

Many folks want enough religion to make them comfortable, but shun the reality of Christianity which might make them uncomfortable.

Millions of Christians live in a sentimental haze of vague piety with soft organ music trembling in the lovely light from 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. (Chad Walsh, *Early Christians of the Twenty-first Century*).

In his book, *Basic Christianity*, John R. W. Stott wrote:

“You can believe in Christ intellectually and admire Him; you can say your prayers to Him through the keyhole (I did for many years); you can push coins at Him under the door; you can be moral, decent, upright and good, you can be religious and pious; you can have been baptized and confirmed; you can be deeply versed in the philosophy of religion; you can be a theological student and even an ordained minister — and still not have opened the door to Christ. There is no substitute for this.”

Jesus Christ said of religious people, “This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me” (Matt. 15:8). The way to have a proper heart relationship with Christ, that is, to be spiritually circumcised, is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin, for eternal life, and for a righteousness that makes one acceptable before God. Real, living, dynamic Christianity can be had:

“If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed. For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for

the same Lord over all is nigh unto all that call upon him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom. 10:9-13).