

Romans Lesson 3

Romans 2:25-False Security of Ritual

In Romans 2, Paul presented the principle that the human race typically puts confidence for their salvation in four areas: 1.morality, 2.heritage, 3.knowledge, 4.ceremony and ritual. Paul proceeded to reveal why each of these is actually a false sense of righteousness and spiritual security. Because Paul was Jewish and many of the early Christians were Jewish, he presented this false sense of security from a Jewish religious perspective, but it could be applied to any race or religion. It is obvious to me that today as American Christians we also have a sense of a higher morality, heritage, knowledge, and religious ceremony than the rest of the world, and therefore a tendency to put our confidence in those factors rather than the Savior who redeemed us. In the first century church that Paul ministered in throughout the Mediterranean world there was considerable pressure to add some of the Old Testament rituals like circumcision to the gospel. The argument was basically, "Yes you are saved by the grace of God and it is received by faith, but you also need to be circumcised and keep the Mosaic Law. Paul had repeatedly had this debate with some of the Jewish believers in the Jerusalem church, so he was very sensitive to the issue. We see in the book of Acts in chapter 15 that Paul and Barnabas journeyed to Jerusalem to settle this matter. All the leaders of the church there gathered to hear the arguments including all the elders, Peter, John, and James the half brother of Jesus. They agreed unanimously that salvation came by faith alone and the Gentiles were not to be troubled about circumcision. Nevertheless, false teachers continued to plague all the churches as we can see from Paul's letters to the churches.

Circumcision

Today in America, circumcision is a common practice, and it is estimated that 80-90% of males are circumcised. The American Academy of Pediatrics says "circumcision is suggested as an effective method of maintaining penile hygiene" even though there is little evidence to prove it. America accepted it as a necessary practice for infants around 1900 beginning with the "germ theory of disease" premise at that time.

The first mention of circumcision in the Bible as a command is found in Genesis 17:10-12. The purpose was that it be "the sign of the covenant" between God and Abram. All of Abram's descendants were to be circumcised, and God said, "thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant." The idea was that everyday in every generation, Abram and his descendants would remember God's promises that He made to Abram to bless them. Moses further explained in Deuteronomy 10:16 that in a spiritual sense it symbolized the cutting away of sin from their heart. No where in the Bible is there any allusion that circumcision is a way unto salvation or that you must be circumcised in order to be saved. Chronologically, we are told in Genesis 15:6 that Abram "believed in the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." Paul, in Romans 4, makes it clear that Abram believed in the Lord and was saved by God based on that faith, and then some 14-15 years later in Genesis 17, God told him to be circumcised as a sign of God's promises. Paul wrote in Romans 4:11 that "Abraham received the sign of circumcision as a seal of his righteousness from the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them".

Romans 2:25-29

In Rom.2:25, Paul made the point that if you want to try and be saved by keeping the law and being circumcised, then go ahead, but when you break the law, and you will, then you are counted as a transgressor and will be condemned. On the other hand, if the uncircumcised Gentile kept the law perfectly, wouldn't God regard him as righteous and thus spiritually circumcised (v.26)? In verse 27, Paul made it clear that God is more interested in the spirit of the command of circumcision than the letter of the command. Just having the external rite of circumcision without righteousness is of NO value.

In v.28-29, Paul makes some outrageous claims about what a real spiritual Jew is, considering Paul's heritage, knowledge, and upbringing as a very religious Jew. Paul says, "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, and neither is circumcision that is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is that which is from the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter." Paul is asserting that just being born into the Jewish race doesn't make you one of God's chosen people and thus saved. Paul is also differentiating between the physical rite of circumcision, and what it should spiritually represent—a life that is separated from the flesh and unto God. In Colossians 2:11, Paul used the image of circumcision to convey the idea that

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Christ removes the sinful flesh with a “circumcision made without hands”. This means that when you believe in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, He comes into your heart and changes your life. In Col.2:13, he goes on to say that Christ made you spiritually alive in a relationship with Him in which all your transgressions were forgiven. At the end of the day, should we participate in religious rites and rituals? We read in Romans 3:30 that God will justify both the circumcised or uncircumcised on the same basis—whether they have faith in Jesus. Therefore your heritage, knowledge, and religious rituals are all valuable only to the extent that they lead you to faith in Christ, and afterward in your walk with Christ.

Philippians 3

Paul wrote a warning to the church in Philippi, Macedonia about false teachers he called “the false circumcision” in Phil.3:2. He went on to say “beware of the false circumcision, 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”. Keep in mind that Paul, by race Jewish, was saying this to Gentiles that he and they together were the true circumcision because their salvation was based on faith and not on the letter of the law of circumcising the flesh. In what do you place your confidence for your salvation and eternal life? In Phil.3:4-9, Paul compared the confidence he used to have in works, heritage, knowledge, and religious ritual, with his new confidence in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Paul concluded that the old stuff he had put his confidence in was “rubbish” compared to knowing Christ Jesus as Lord.

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