

Romans 2:17-29
(Deuteronomy 30:6; Matthew 3:7-10)
“Religion Is Not Enough”

Introduction

Paul continues to paint the dark backdrop against which he will spend most of the letter depicting the glory of the gospel. He began, half way through chapter one, by describing the decadence that has marked the endgame of civilizations throughout history and that certainly marked the Roman Empire of his day, a final stage where people not only act corruptly, but approve of corrupt behavior.

He then turned, in the first half of the second chapter, to address those who agreed with him in his critique of Rome’s decadence, warning them that they also had no excuse before God, because they judged others but secretly indulged in the same behaviors they condemned. Like most of us, they applied a different standard of judgment in accusing others than they used in excusing themselves.

Now Paul brings his critique home to his own people, the Jews. But you and I will miss what Spirit of God would teach us today unless we read these verses from our own perspective. What do I mean? Paul was addressing the old covenant people and warning them against common misinterpretations of how one could rightly claim God’s grace under the old covenant. The danger was in interpreting the old covenant externally and superficially rather than spiritually, and of understanding God’s grace as working from the outside in rather than from the inside out. Is that not the very same danger facing new covenant believers today? If Paul had been addressing us here at Cedar Springs, I suspect he would have written this:

For no one is a *Christian* who is merely one outwardly, nor is *baptism* outward and physical. But a *Christian* is one inwardly, and *baptism* is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God (2:28-29).

Note how, in our text, Paul underscores four common presumptions of religious people, presumptions that can blind us to our true standing before a holy God, and then how Paul, finally, reminds us of the only thing that matters.

Body

1. A religious family cannot make us right with God (2:17).

Paul addresses a great mistaken presumption made by many Jewish people throughout history in thinking that they are automatically right with God by virtue of their birth into the household of Israel. So, too, we must face up to

this same mistaken presumption made by many Christian people throughout history in thinking that they are automatically right with God by virtue of being born into a Christian household. But, as Dr Nelson Bell used to say, "God has no grandchildren." The Old Testament is replete with illustrations: for example, the sons of both Eli and Samuel.

2. Religious knowledge cannot make us right with God (2:18).

Knowing God's will and approving what is excellent should certainly be a mark of every true child of God. But knowing God's will and approving what is excellent cannot in itself save us. We have the disturbing illustration in the Bible of Solomon, who first showed his great wisdom by saving the child of a prostitute, and ended in folly, sacrificing his own children to Molech.

3. Religious service cannot make us right with God (2:19-24).

All the activities Paul lists here are important ministries entrusted to God's covenant people. But the mere performance of those acts of service is in itself unable to make anyone right with God. So, too, for church folk, doing the things entrusted to us, even the most important things – telling people the good news of salvation through Christ, teaching the Bible, praying, doing acts of mercy in Jesus' name – all this is in itself unable to make us right with God.

4. Religious ritual cannot make us right with God (2:25-27).

In the case of the Jews, the religious rite-of-entry was circumcision. For Christians, it is baptism. Moses was clear in warning Israel that physical circumcision was only of value if it depicted an inner work of God that Moses called "heart-circumcision." So, too, John the Baptist warned his hearers that he could only baptize them with water as a sign of the coming One, who would baptize them with the Spirit. It is Spirit-baptism, not water-baptism, that saves, just as under the old covenant it was heart-circumcision alone that saved.

5. Only one thing matters (2:28-29).

Our problem begins in the heart, and so must the solution: only God's Spirit can give us a new heart. Until that happens, we cannot be right with God.

Conclusion

Paul will be talking soon about the gospel, about how God gives his Son's righteousness to us who believe. But only the Spirit of God can open our eyes to see, our hearts to desire, and our wills to respond to his grace. For, "a *Christian* is one inwardly, and *baptism* is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit."

© John M. Wood, all rights reserved