

SOUND DOCTRINE FOR SPIRITUAL SUCCESS – Studies in Romans

The Danger of Ritualism (Romans 2:17-29)

“But if you bear the name “Jew” and rely upon the Law and boast in God, and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth, you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? For ‘THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU.’ Just as it is written.

Rituals exist within every religion throughout our world. Judaism with its rite of circumcision and Christianity with its ordinance of baptism are no exceptions to that rule. They serve as important symbols of the spiritual reality representing each faith. However, the danger inherent in these significant ceremonies is that the symbolism can be mistaken for the spiritual truth portrayed in those metaphors. Too often, circumcision and baptism have both served such a misguided purpose, in providing a false sense of security for anyone participating in those rituals.

So, in Romans 2:17-29, Paul takes the opportunity to address the danger of ritualism and its adverse effect upon his generation of fellow Jews. It also seems as if he is confronting his former self, the self-righteous Pharisee Saul, in exposing the hypocrisy which existed in his own life, prior to his conversion to Christ. The description of the “Jew” in vv17-24, would have been typical of the Pharisees whom Jesus confronted during His earthly ministry. In Matthew 23, Jesus calls out those religious leaders, labelling them as hypocrites seven times. Paul, in reflecting upon his former life and that of his Pharisaical colleagues, does the same.

But the apostle saves his most scathing rebuke for vv25-29. He completely shatters the self-righteous facade of his Jewish brethren in a manner which would have been considered shocking; by comparing a circumcised Jew with an uncircumcised Gentile. He makes it clear that what should distinguish the two groups is not their participation in a ceremony, but their fulfillment of a lifestyle (vv25-26). And if, hypothetically, the uncircumcised Gentile is better at his lifestyle than the circumcised Jew, the former becomes the judge of the latter (v27). Could it be that Paul, in his ministry to the Gentiles, found some of them to be of a higher moral and ethical character than his fellow Jews, motivating this rebuke in vv25-27? Would he be alone in discovering that this is true of some non-Christians in comparison to those who currently claim to be followers of the Savior? Nevertheless, Paul chooses to close the chapter on a positive note, in vv28-29 –

“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.”

Paul wants his entire readership to know, that what matters to God is not external appearance, but a heart attitude of faith which is in a right relationship with Him. When that is the case, a consistent lifestyle, not one of sinless perfection, will gradually and inevitably follow.