



# THE DANGERS OF RELIGION

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1193

Romans 2:17-29

Fifth Message

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April 11th, 1999

Years ago when I ministered among students I was asked a number of times whether it was easier to win to Christ young people who come from pagan homes rather than Christian homes. Many youth pastors I knew back then said it was easier to win kids from Christian homes. Having wrestled with this issue in the intervening years I would have to disagree. It is easier to win to Christ kids from pagan homes than from homes that are religious but that fail to deal realistically with life.

In his book, *Early Christians of the Twenty-first Century*, Chad Walsh wrote:

Millions of Christians live in a sentimental haze of vague piety, with soft organ music trembling in the lovely light from the stained glass windows. Their religion is a thing of pleasant emotional quivers divorced from the intellect, divorced from the will, 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 case of mild Christianity so as to protect him from the real thing.<sup>1</sup>

Sadly, this is the position of many in the evangelical world today.

In our studies in the book of Romans we have seen that the thrust of the apostle Paul's argument in the opening chapters is to deliver us from our illogical faith in what some term the basic goodness of man. We tend to cling to the notion that man is basically good, even though we know that, given the state of the world we live in, that is an irrational concept. We like to think we're doing all right but, according to Paul, we are not. We have all sorts of things that are wrong with us. If we think we are doing well we are living in a fool's paradise.

As we have already noted, Paul argues his point by anticipating and responding to objections to what he has to say. In his wide ranging critique of the human race he has already leveled the depraved Gentile and the critical moralizer. At this point he anticipates the Jews protesting, "Paul, you can't treat us like Gentiles. Don't forget, we are the chosen people. God gave us the Law and sealed our relationship with the rite of circumcision. These are the greatest privileges in the world. Are you saying that we aren't any better off than the Gentiles? If you are, are you not completely disregard-

ing those two gifts which protect us from God's judgment?"

Paul responds to this argument in the second chapter of his letter. He comments on the two gifts of the Law (verses 17-24), and circumcision (verses 25-29). In the process he warns the Jews about two dangers; first, the danger of thinking they are acceptable to God because they possess the truth (verses 17-24); and second, the danger of thinking they are acceptable because they are affiliated with God's people (verses 25-29).

The Jews realized that with respect to the truth, they were privileged far above everyone else. Paul describes this sense of privilege now, in verses 17-18:

**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,**

Here Paul lists six things concerning the sense of privilege felt by the Jews. First, says Paul, "*you bear the name 'Jew.'*" So proud were they of their identity that many of them who lived in Gentile cities used the word "Jew" as a surname.

Second, says the apostle, they "*rely on the law.*" They thought that because they had received the Torah at Mt. Sinai they had a unique standing before God; and that possessing it (not living by it) was their protection against disaster.

Third, they "*boast in God.*" This phrase is used in other places of a positive quality, but in this context it refers to their boasting that they were God's favorites, i.e., they had a monopoly on God.

Fourth, they prided themselves on the fact that they "*know His will*"; literally, "the will," i.e., the will to which every other will must be compared.

Fifth, they "*approve the things that are essential.*" They prided themselves on their ability to make better moral decisions.

Sixth, they were "*instructed out of the Law.*" The Law was their guide.

Now these six things are wonderful privileges but, as great as they are they had a beguiling effect on the Jews. These privileges made them feel very good about themselves compared to the theologically uneducated Gentiles. They were deceived into thinking that these attributes made them acceptable to God.

We recognize their spiritual blindness. But we must remember that this is a double-edged sword. It pierces the heart of the religious Jew, yes, but it scores us too. We may feel superior about our Biblical knowledge compared to the average person. After all, we have the Bible in twenty-five different versions, and we take great pride in owning a specific version. Some of us say, "I am a King James Christian!" Those who know much of the revealed will of God (the Bible) think that because they have a patent on truth, they are fine. It is easy for us, as it was for the Jews who rejected certain attitudes and actions in life, to think that God is impressed by the things we don't do: We don't dance, we don't drink, we don't go to the movies, we don't play cards, we don't drink coffee, and so on.

This deception that arises from our sense of privilege can produce in one's life a feeling of pride and arrogance that sees oneself as superior to others. This is what Paul now goes on to describe, in verses 19-20:

**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,**

Such pride can make people obnoxious and intolerant. That's what it did to the Jews. They saw themselves as guides, lights, correctors and teachers. They looked down with scorn on the "unwashed" Gentiles. Instead of trying to create a just society that would shine as a light to the Gentiles, they narrowed their vision and began competing with each other, becoming absorbed in their own spiritual calisthenics. They regarded strictness as a means of achieving status. The Gentiles sensed this and resented it. Tacitus, a Roman writer in the second century, said, "Among themselves their honesty is inflexible, their compassion quick to move, but to all other persons they show the hatred of antagonism."<sup>2</sup> Kent Hughes summarizes it well: "The very privileges which should have produced saints produced arrogant, loveless egotists instead!"<sup>3</sup>

This is true today among many who hold to the truth of the gospel. Rather than producing humility and grace, the religious privileges they have received have cultivated self-righteous, self-centered, and self-deceived snobs. It is this very thing that may have provoked this parable by Jesus, from the gospel of Luke:

**To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I**

**tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."** (Luke 18:9-14, NIV)

Hughes writes: "Whenever a follower of Christ feels superior, he should beware, for such an attitude is not a sign of God's grace. To come into a position of spiritual privilege only to succumb to self-righteous arrogance indicates that one's soul is in great danger."<sup>4</sup> Have you ever asked yourself why it is that the very people who are drawn to Jesus seem repelled by Christians?

Philip Yancey shares this story about a prostitute who came to a friend of his for help. She was in bad shape: homeless, sick, and unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter. In her tears she confessed that she had even been using her daughter in sexually abusive ways to support her own drug habit. The friend could hardly bear listening to this sordid story, and now knew he was legally liable to report this case of child abuse. What stuck with Yancey about the story was her answer to a question this friend asked her nearing the end of their time. She asked the woman if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. She said she will never forget the look of pure, naive shock that crossed her face. "Church!" she cried. "Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."<sup>5</sup> What a sad commentary on the state of the Church.

Continuing, Paul has some penetrating rhetorical questions for those who are feeling self-righteously arrogant. These are good questions for all of us to ponder. Verses 21-24:

**you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one should 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.**

It was common knowledge that many of the Jewish leaders were guilty of these offenses. Though blameless in their theology they found ways to justify their unethical business practices, enabling them to carry out a little "refined" stealing. One commentator quotes Rabbi Jochanan Ben Zakkai, a contemporary of Paul's, who complained in his day about "the increase of murder, adultery, sexual vice, commercial and judicial corruption, bitter sectarian strife, and other evils."<sup>6</sup>

Paul concludes this section with a crushing accusation: "*the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.*" Though the Jews claimed to have so much and to be so knowledgeable, they were blaspheming, and turning people away from God by their actions. How relevant this is to evangelical Christianity! By our attitudes we too cause people to turn away from God. But God is not impressed with our conservative theolo-

gy, and neither are our neighbors.

Having dealt with the danger of the Jews thinking they were acceptable to God because they possessed the truth, Paul now turns to a second danger, that of thinking they were all right because they were associated with God's people. They thought they were secure because they were God's chosen people, and the symbol which proved that truth was the rite of circumcision. They believed, almost superstitiously, that circumcision actually secured their salvation. One rabbi wrote: "Circumcised men do not descend into Gehenna." And another: "Circumcision will deliver Israel from Gehenna."<sup>7</sup> Verses 25-29:

**For indeed circumcision is of value, if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. If therefore the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? And will not he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither 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.**

If possessing the law does not exempt the Jews from God's judgment, then neither does circumcision. The rite of circumcision was very significant. It was a God-given sign, and it did seal their covenant. When it was given to Abraham it was a symbol that all of his life belonged to God, and that is what it was meant to symbolize in his descendants. But it wasn't a magic charm, a permanent life insurance policy against God's wrath.

I have in my hand a gold ring. Years ago it cost a very pretty preschool teacher a few hundred dollars. My wife Kathy gave this ring to me to me on the day we were married. It is a symbol of our love, but it is not the substance or the source of it. When we struggle, I don't rub it for good luck or pray to it. If I were to lose it, I would be disappointed, but our marriage would continue unharmed. It is a symbol, that's all.

But what if I tried to make this ring more than that? What if I decided to be abusive and unfaithful to Kathy? Suppose I started refusing to care for my family's needs and Kathy said to me: "You don't want to be my husband. You don't love me or the children. I want you to leave." And what if I responded: "How dare you talk to me that way or challenge my love! Look at this ring you gave me. I haven't taken it off for 24 years. I may have beaten you and cheated on you, but I've worn your ring." Do you think that Kathy's response would be: "Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot. You have worn the ring and made a tremendous sacrifice in doing so"? Of course not. And why is that? It is because apart from the love

that it symbolizes, the ring means nothing. The symbol represents love, but it cannot replace it.

Paul's response is direct and clear to the superstitious, false confidence of the Jews: "*circumcision is of value, if you practice the Law.*" He doesn't deny circumcision's divine origin, but he does say that if the Jews want to depend on that for salvation, then they had better understand and live out its intended significance and keep the whole Law. If the meaning behind circumcision is disregarded it is as meaningless as a wedding ring on an adulterer's finger. John Stott summarizes Paul words in this way: "We may perhaps express Paul's double assertion in terms of two simple equations. Circumcision minus obedience equal uncircumcision, while uncircumcision plus obedience equals circumcision. The consequence Paul infers from this will have been profoundly shocking to Jewish people. [Rather than them] sitting in judgment on uncircumcised pagans,...the roles will be reversed."<sup>8</sup>

We don't have to stretch to apply Paul's words to ourselves. All we have to do is substitute the word "circumcision" for baptism or church membership. Many rest upon the fact that they have been baptized, confirmed or accepted as members of a church as the sign that they belong to God. The church where I served before I came to PBC emphasized the rite of baptism so much so that if one was not baptized, it was an open question as to whether he was Christian. Consequently, if you were to ask a teenager in that church how to become a Christian, as I did on many occasions, he would say, "You must be baptized." I felt that way growing up in the Catholic church. If someone asked me if I was a Christian, I would say, "Yes, I'm a Catholic."

Don't misunderstand what I am saying, I am not suggesting that symbols are unimportant. Some symbols, baptism and communion for example, which illustrate the meaning of the cross and resurrection, are very important. They symbolize and even articulate salvation. But they do not and cannot impart salvation. It is a critical mistake to exalt the symbol at the expense of what it symbolizes.

Paul's conclusion about the religious man is set out in verses 28-29. I like Eugene Peterson's paraphrase:

**Don't you see: it's not the cut of a knife that makes you a Jew. You become a Jew by who you are. It's the mark of God on your heart, not of a knife on your skin, that makes a Jew. And recognition comes from God, not legalistic critics.<sup>9</sup>**

In redefining who is a Jew, that is, who is really a member of God's covenant people, Paul draws a sharp contrast. John Stott puts it clearly: "[It] is not something outward and visible, but inward and invisible; ...[it is] in the heart, not the flesh; ...it is effected by the Spirit not the Law; and...it wins the approval of God [not man]."<sup>10</sup> One of the great dangers of religion is that we are comfortable with what is visible and outward and superficial, but what matters to God is that which is

deep and inward, and only his Spirit can accomplish this in our hearts.

Paul did not introduce this concept into the Bible. Throughout the Old Testament God complained of his people's uncircumcised hearts. He appealed through Jeremiah: "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem" (Jer. 4:4). He even promised to do that. He said in Deuteronomy: "The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live" (Deut. 30:6).

And this promise is fulfilled in Christ. Paul says in Colossians:

**For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ. (Col. 2:9-11)**

The question is, Where does your confidence lie? In your knowledge of God's word? In your religious affiliation? In the fact that you have been baptized or confirmed? If it is, then you are deceived. True salvation is a matter of the heart. It is not a question of whether you are baptized, galvanized or pasteurized. Do you have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? and have you received the gift of righteousness which God gives to those who do not deserve it and cannot earn it, but receive it by his love and grace?

<sup>1</sup> Chad Walsh, *Early Christians of the Twenty-first Century*. Quoted by Ray Stedman.

<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957) 35.

<sup>3</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Romans* (Crossway Books, 1991) 64.

<sup>4</sup> Hughes, 65.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 11.

<sup>6</sup> C. H. Dodd, *Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1947) 39.

<sup>7</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. I (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975) 172.

<sup>8</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Romans* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994) 93.

<sup>9</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993) 307.

<sup>10</sup> Stott, 94.

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