

Subject: *Exposing Empty Religion*

Scripture: *Romans 2:17-29*

The world is full of religion and religious people. The problem is that people depend on religion to make them right with God. What all people need is not religion, but redemption through Jesus Christ.

This story reveals how true salvation is different from religion. A certain man fell into a dark, slimy pit. He tried to climb out of the pit, but he just couldn't get out. Confucius came along and saw the man and said, "Poor fellow, if you had listened to me you would never have got there." Buddha came along and saw the man and said, "Poor fellow, if you will come up here, I'll help you." Then Jesus came along, saw the man and said, "Poor fellow." Then He jumped down into the pit and got him out.

The devil is not opposed to religion. He loves it and uses it. He is the sponsor of all religion. Satan is the father of deception and destruction. He will use any system of beliefs or practices that will keep a person from real salvation through the grace of God. Satan is a liar and the most destructive lies are about God and how to be right with God.

Religion gives people a sense of security. People everywhere are looking for security: job and financial security, home security, national security, and eternal security. Deep down people want to feel that when life is over and they meet God, everything is going to be OK.

In Romans 2 Paul deals with the Jews who feel secure in their Jewish religion and reveals that they have a false security. They are smug and confident, when in reality they are guilty and condemned by God. Near the end of His Sermon on the Mount Jesus warned:

Matthew 7:13 *Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat.*

Who would ever think that the immoral heathen and the religious Jew are traveling on the same broad road?

Proverbs 14:12 *There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.*

Paul is building a case showing that all people are sinners in need of salvation. In chapter 1 he proves that the heathen, pagan people are guilty and condemned. In 2:1-16, Paul proves that self-righteous hypocrites are guilty and condemned. Now in 2:17-29, he proves that the religious Jews were also guilty and condemned. Paul exposes the lies of empty religion.

1. Resting in name and heritage

Paul addressed those who were proud to be called a Jew (vs. 17). They relied or trusted in the privilege of having the law and boasted that they had God on their side. The name "Jew" comes from the name "Judah" (praise). The Jewish people were set aside to give God praise. They were extremely proud of their heritage and felt so honored to be God's chosen people, but they failed to praise God and honor Him. Jesus dealt with this problem in John 8.

John 8:32-44³² *And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.* ³³ *They answered him, We be Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest*

thou, Ye shall be made free? ³⁴ Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. ³⁵ And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: but the Son abideth ever. ³⁶ If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed. ³⁷ I know that ye are Abraham's seed; but ye seek to kill me, because my word hath no place in you. ³⁸ I speak that which I have seen with my Father: and ye do that which ye have seen with your father. ³⁹ They answered and said unto him, Abraham is our father. Jesus saith unto them, If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham. ⁴⁰ But now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth, which I have heard of God: this did not Abraham. ⁴¹ Ye do the deeds of your father. Then said they to him, We be not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God. ⁴² Jesus said unto them, If God were your Father, ye would love me: for I proceeded forth and came from God; neither came I of myself, but he sent me. ⁴³ Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word. ⁴⁴ Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.

The Jews were blinded by pride. They rested in the law. That is they felt secure by just having God's law. This was a false security, thinking they were God's favorites and they were better off than other people. So they boasted in being God's people. They had God's special favor and blessing when others did not.

Some people feel secure because they are a Jew or a Christian, a Baptist, a Methodist, or some other label. Some people have a false hope and that is worse than no hope.

2. Knowing and teaching God's Word without obeying it

In verses 18-23 Paul pressed his case a little farther. These people knew God's will and were instructed in God's ways. They felt sure they were a guide to the blind, a light to those in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, and a teacher of babes. But knowing God's will and His ways is not enough. Paul said, "You are confident that you know so much and you are so wise and capable of teaching other people. Isn't it about time for you to examine and teach yourself? They didn't practice what they preached. They failed to live by what they knew and taught. They violated the very things they said were sinful.

In Romans 1 Paul said the Gentiles knew the truth about God in creation, but they held back the truth and replaced it. Now he says to the Jews, "You know so much more in God's Law, but you have ignored it and not practiced it. You're even worse than the Gentiles."

James 1:22 *But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.*

They dishonored the Lord and caused the Gentiles to blaspheme God's name (vs. 24). Paul referred to *Isaiah 52:5*, which speaks of the Jews after they rebelled against God and the Gentiles blasphemed God because of their disobedience. When God's people don't practice what they preach, the unbelievers mock and blaspheme God. They say that our Christian faith is a charade and God is not glorious. As far as they are concerned, it's all just a game and they're not interested. Nathan confronted David after he had sinned with Bathsheba.

2 Samuel 12:14 *Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die.*

Jonah 1:8-9⁸ *Then said they unto him, Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause this evil is upon us; What is thine occupation? and whence comest thou? what is thy country? and of what people art thou?*⁹ *And he said unto them, I am an Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land.*

The way we live either supports or undermines what we claim to believe.

Titus 2:4-5⁴ *That they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children,*⁵ *To be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed.*

There is a great danger in relying on name and privilege.

There is a great danger in knowing and teaching the truth but not living it.

And there is a third danger...

3. Relying on outward ritual instead of inward change

Paul now comes to the issue of circumcision. This was the outward sign of the Jewish people since the days of Abraham.

Genesis 17:10-11¹⁰ *This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised.*¹¹ *And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you.*

Circumcision was a sign of the covenant between God and His people, the Jews. As time went on, the Jews viewed this as a sign of God's protection and blessing even though they didn't live for Him and honor Him. They depended on the outward sign of circumcision instead of the inward reality of obedience. In religion people often depend on baptism, confirmation, or some outward ritual instead of a real change of heart.

What people need is not outward ritual but inward repentance and rebirth. People are not right with God by religious ceremonies, but by redemption and regeneration. There is a big difference between religion and salvation. Jesus stressed this point in the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 5:20 *For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.* The scribes and Pharisees were very religious, but they were also very lost.

Matthew 7:22-23²² *Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?*²³ *And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.* Religious works is no substitute for salvation. The Lord knows who belong to Him.