

Chapter Twenty-three
Studies in the Epistle of Paul to the Romans
The Condemnation of the Religionist for Misplaced Faith
Misplaced Faith in Religious Rituals

“²⁵ For circumcision verily profiteth, if thou keep the law: but if thou be a breaker of the law, thy circumcision is made uncircumcision. ²⁶ Therefore if the uncircumcision keep the righteousness of the law, shall not his uncircumcision be counted for circumcision? ²⁷ And shall not uncircumcision which is by nature, if it fulfil the law, judge thee, who by the letter and circumcision dost transgress the law? ²⁸ For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither *is that* circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: ²⁹ But he *is* a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision *is that* of the heart, in the spirit, *and* not in the letter; whose praise *is* not of men, but of God” (Romans 2:25-29).

In our previous study, we saw God’s condemnation on the Religionist for misplaced faith in a religious lifestyle. In this study we will see God’s condemnation on the Religionist for misplaced faith in religious rituals. For the Religionist, religious rituals are the means through which a person is brought to a hope of salvation. The Religionist never really knows with any assurance that he will go to heaven when he dies. For the Religionist, salvation is an ongoing process. He thinks he is SAFE; not SAVED

By the time of Christ, Judaism had completely perverted the purpose of religious rituals. The sacrifices and rituals of the Old Testament Law were means God used to remind the nation that their hope was in the coming Messiah. Each sacrifice and ritual was the Old Covenant pointing in expectation to fulfillment in the New Covenant through the blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The Old Covenant (Mosaic Covenant) sacrifices were mere shadows of the real thing in Christ Jesus.

The focus of each sacrifice and ritual was the coming Messiah. Apostate Israel had perverted those sacrifices and rituals to a place where Messiah was no longer needed. The sacrifices and rituals became their way of salvation. It was a simple matter of misplaced faith, but it was a serious matter in that faith was placed in something other than Messiah. Religious sacrifices and rituals can never take away sin or free man from his condemnation. The “shadows” became their reality and they became a prison of false hope.

“¹ For the law having a shadow of good things to come, *and* not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. ² For then would they not have ceased to be offered? because that the worshippers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins. ³ But in those *sacrifices there is* a remembrance again *made* of sins every year. ⁴ For *it is* not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins. ⁵ Wherefore when he cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a body hast thou prepared me: ⁶ In burnt offerings and *sacrifices* for sin thou hast had no pleasure” (Hebrews 10:1-6).

The Old Testament sacrifices and rituals were a mere “shadow” of what Jesus would do when He came. They were “not the very image.” Shadows are created by light shining on a solid subject in the dark and the solid subject blocking the light from passing through. The very fact that a shadow is present reveals that it is not the object. The point of the metaphor is that when a shadow is present a person naturally looks for the real object that casts the shadow. It would be foolish to become preoccupied with the shadow. It would be even more foolish to begin trusting in the shadow for deliverance. Jesus and His work is the real thing. Once the work of Jesus was completed, all sacrifices and all religious rituals were all abolished. There was no longer any need for them.

⁹ Then said he, Lo, I come to do thy will, O God. He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second. ¹⁰ By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once *for all*. ¹¹ And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: ¹² But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; ¹³ From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. ¹⁴ For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified. ¹⁵ *Whereof* the Holy Ghost also is a witness to us: for after that he had said before, ¹⁶ This *is* the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them; ¹⁷ And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more. ¹⁸ Now where remission of these *is, there is* no more offering for sin” (Hebrews 10:9-18).

The Law with its sacrifices and rituals were never intended to be a means of salvation. The sacrifices and religious rituals of the Law were the means the Old Testament believer was to express his faith in the coming work of Messiah. These sacrifices and rituals were never intended for unbelievers or as a means to save lost people. The Christian Religionist has replaced the Old Testament sacrifices and rituals with sacraments and liturgies.

The Lord’s Supper has become a continuing sacrifice whereby Christ is offered again and again for the forgiveness of sins replacing all the sacrifices of the Old Testament. Water Baptism has become a religious ritual through which a person receives the Holy Spirit and cleansing from sin replacing the circumcision of the Old Testament. The Church has become a complex, gargantuan hierarchy with a multi-leveled priesthood rather than the simple autonomous local body of ministering believers it was intended to be.

Although Jews “boasted” (Romans 2:23-24) in the correctness and righteousness of the Law, they dishonored the Law and they dishonored God and His Name through inward and outward disobedience.

Like water baptism is today, circumcision was a sign of an oath to God. It signified a covenant people living separated from sin and unto God. The real meaning of circumcision was not the outward ritual, but the inward reality. Jeremiah relates this intended reality with words detailing that real circumcision was the circumcision of the “heart.”

“Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, and take away the foreskins of your heart, ye men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem: lest my fury come forth like fire, and burn that none can quench *it*, because of the evil of your doings” (Jeremiah 4:4).

The misrepresentation of the purpose of circumcision was replaced in the early Church by ritual Baptism. Paul spoke directly and clearly to the true meanings of both circumcision and baptism in Colossians 2:9-15.

⁹ For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. ¹⁰ And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power: ¹¹ In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: ¹² Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with *him* through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. ¹³ And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; ¹⁴ Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; ¹⁵ *And* having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it” (Colossians 2:9-15).

This text teaches us that all those “in Christ” have positionally been circumcised with His circumcision, baptized with His baptism and risen with His resurrection. All Christians have received circumcision by the circumcision of Christ.

The manner in which the believer has been “circumcised also” (through Christ’s death and resurrection) is a better circumcision than the Judaizers “by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, . . . buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the “operation” (working) of God, who raised Him from the dead” (Col. 2:11-12). Is Paul referring to water baptism as the direct fulfillment of circumcision? Obviously this cannot be. This circumcision is “made without hands.” No human hands are involved in the circumcision we have “in Christ” and neither are there any hands involved in the baptism we have “in Christ.

The Christian’s circumcision is spiritual. The Christian’s baptism is spiritual. The union the regenerated (re-created) believer has with Christ in His death and resurrection is only symbolized by ritual baptism and is an outward expression of inward reality of saving faith. Therefore, the “born again” believer is “complete in” Christ the moment he believes. No ritual can add ANYTHING to what Christ does the moment we believe the gospel and confess Him as Lord calling on His Name to save us (Romans 10:9-13).

It is clear from Scripture that water baptism was never intended to be anything more than an outward picture of an inward reality.

“¹⁸ For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: ¹⁹ By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; ²⁰ Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. ²¹ The like figure whereunto *even* baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ: ²² Who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him” (I Peter 3:18-22).

The “ark” was a type of Christ. The water that brought God’s condemnation of death upon those outside of the ark, brought salvation to those inside it. The water was a type of the Holy Spirit. It is Holy Spirit Baptism that puts us into Christ. Peter clearly states that the baptism he refers to is NOT water baptism (“not the putting away of the filth of the flesh”). Holy Spirit baptism saves us from God’s condemnation on the Adamic race by regeneration, which puts us into the “new creation . . . in Christ” as our new Federal Head (I Corinthians 12:13).

The absence of the definitive article in Romans 2:25 before the word “circumcision” carries the idea that the truth of the verse is intended to apply to every religious ritual that is similar. The idea is that Old Covenant religious rituals were only profitable when the inward reality existed. By themselves they are completely worthless.

For instance, there would be no purpose in participating in the Lord’s Supper as a remembrance of what Christ Jesus did to save you if you have never trusted in His finished work and accepted Him as Lord. For instance, there would be no purpose in participating in believer’s baptism and declaring yourself a committed disciple of Jesus Christ, dead to a life in the flesh and alive to live in the resurrection power of the indwelling Holy Spirit if you were still going to live in the flesh and in rebellion.

The statement of Romans 2:26 is that if the uncircumcised (physically) have the inward reality of living separated from sin and unto God, that inward reality (although uncircumcised physically) will be accounted to him as being circumcised.

All religious externalism (the belief in meritorious grace coming to the participator) is the product and invention of the human traditions intent on appeasing God. Religious externalism always evolves into *hocus pocus* (if we do this, God will do this). Religious externalism is an attempt to manipulate God to do what the participant wants through prayer, religious works or religious ritual.

God does not work that way. He gives and provides because He loves us. He loves us because He is love (not because we are loveable). God loves because of what He is, not because of what we are or do. God does not want to be appeased with superficiality and dead sacrifices. God hates it when people, who claim to know Him, think they can pay Him off like some kind of loan shark so He won’t break their legs.

Perhaps nowhere in Scripture is God's attitude toward religious externalism better summed up than in Isaiah 1:4-20.

“⁴ Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward. ⁵ Why should ye be stricken any more? ye will revolt more and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. ⁶ From the sole of the foot even unto the head *there is* no soundness in it; *but* wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment. ⁷ Your country *is* desolate, your cities *are* burned with fire: your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and *it is* desolate, as overthrown by strangers. ⁸ And the daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city. ⁹ Except the LORD of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, *and* we should have been like unto Gomorrah. ¹⁰ Hear the word of the LORD, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah. ¹¹ To what purpose *is* the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the LORD: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. ¹² When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? ¹³ Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; *it is* iniquity, even the solemn meeting. ¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear *them*. ¹⁵ And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. ¹⁶ Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; ¹⁷ Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. ¹⁸ Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. ¹⁹ If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: ²⁰ But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken *it*” (Isaiah 1:4-20).

Obviously from verses 11-15, the practice of religious rituals and the observance of the ceremonial aspects of the Law had not ceased (perhaps, they had even increased thinking this would appeased God). The only thing God could bless was when they became genuine in their faith (verses 16-17). Much of today's Christianity goes to Church on Sunday, does their little religious ritual and walks out the door to live as if God doesn't exist.

Real, live, transforming beliefs change us on the inside and are translated into life on the outside. Religious externalism is used by people whose belief in God is only superficial. It is done for the praise of men (Romans 2:29). God is reasonable about sin if we are honest with Him about it (v 18). He wants to cleanse us and bless us. In order for Him to do that, we must be genuinely repentant, “willing and obedient” (v 19).

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1. What purpose does the Religionist see in the practice of and participation in religious rituals? _____

2. What was God's real purpose in the sacrifices and rituals of the Old Testament? _____

3. Read Hebrews 10:1-6. Draw some conclusions about misplaced faith in religious rituals from this text. _____

4. Read Hebrews 10:9-18. Discuss the significance of Old Testament rituals as "shadows" and why they were abolished once Jesus came and paid the penalty of sin on the Cross of Calvary. _____

5. Discuss the following statement: *The sacrifices and religious rituals of the Law were the means the Old Testament believer was to express his faith in the coming work of Messiah. These sacrifices and rituals were never intended for unbelievers or as a means to save lost people.* _____

6. Discuss how the Christian Religionist has replaced the Old Testament sacrifices and rituals with sacraments and liturgies. _____

7. What was the original significance behind circumcision? _____

8. Read Jeremiah 4:4. Discuss how Jeremiah was seeking to correct the dead externalism of the practice of ritual circumcision. _____

9. Read 1 Peter 3:18-22. Discuss how Peter establishes that water baptism, like real circumcision, is an outward picture of an inward reality. _____

10. Read Romans 2:25-26. Discuss the meaning of these verses and make application of this meaning to the Lord's Supper and ritual baptism. _____

11. Discuss what is meant by the following statement: *Religious externalism always evolves into hocus pocus.* _____

12. Read Isaiah 1:4-20. Use this portion of Scripture to establish your theology about God's attitude towards religious externalism. _____
