

INSUFFICIENT

Romans 2:17-29

What is really important in life? What can we count on? As citizens of the United States, we think that particular status is a very important distinction because we have privileges that are associated with “being an American.” The fact that we (as a nation) recognize that certain rights or privileges are God-given and cannot be denied is a really big deal! Most people could even recite the three basic rights as being “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Add to this the Bill of Rights which make up the first ten amendments to the foundational governing document of this nation (the Constitution) and we all can appreciate the advantages.

What if freedom of religion and speech are denied to some and some states pass laws against the right to bear arms, or some people deny others due process of law by declaring a person guilty before any proof is given or the person is not allowed to present a defense? We have seen such things encroaching upon our basic rights and some groups have even gone so far as to deny life to a certain segment of people such as the unborn. When such things happen, then the benefits of being an American are not realized. Also, if we don’t exercise our freedoms and fail to pursue happiness, then the outcome is not a lot different from those who are not privileged to be citizens of our nation. Even worse than not taking advantage of our privileges is exercising such privileges for ourselves and then attempting to deny them to others.

In Paul’s letter to the church at Rome, there were both Gentile and Jewish believers in the church. Paul wrote to them about the good news of God’s salvation that is available to all people and addressed some of the recognized differences in the backgrounds of Gentiles and Jews. There were certainly some advantages that the Jewish believers should have had in coming to faith in Christ just because of their backgrounds. After reviewing the situation of the Gentiles who had been exposed to the general revelation of God within each individual and in the physical world creation, he then moved on to examine the impact of God’s special revelation that had been available to the Jews.

As Paul made the transition from focusing on the Gentiles to the Jews, we notice in the early parts of the second chapter that both groups had similar issues. Both groups had knowledge of God and what was expected, but the tendency was to use that information to judge others rather than apply it to themselves. Warren Wiersbe observed that God’s judgment is according to truth (in reference to verse 2:2). God does not have one standard for the Jews and another for the Gentiles. One who reads the list of sins in Romans 1:29–32 cannot escape the fact that each person is guilty of at least one of them. There are “sins of the flesh and of the spirit” (2 Cor. 7:1); there are “prodigal sons” and “elder brothers” (Luke 15:11–32). In condemning the Gentiles for their sins, the Jews were really condemning themselves. As the old saying puts it, “When you point your finger at somebody else, the other three are pointing at you.”

Hypocrisy Revealed – 2:17-24

¹⁷ But if you bear the name “Jew” and rely upon the Law and boast in God, ¹⁸ and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law, ¹⁹ and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, ²⁰ a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth, ²¹ you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? ²² You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? ²⁴ For “THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU,” just as it is written. Romans 2:17–24 (NASB95)

Jewish believers had an advantage in being exposed to the foundations from which God's salvation good news emerged and was made clear in the Incarnation. Because they did know so much more, they could recognize the error of pagan world beliefs and practices. Consequently, they were in a good position to help others in pointing them to truth and good behavior. There was, however, a fairly common problem among these Jews and that problem was their failure to apply the principles and truths in their own lives.

The fact that they were known as "Jews" was a source of pride to them in somewhat the same way that many in our nation take pride in being "Americans." The problem with such thinking is the meaning of the word pride. There is certain nothing wrong with being "glad" to be an American. The attitude that we should have in our gladness is that of "humility" in realizing it is by the "grace of God" that we are even afforded such a privilege.

Paul also addressed their relationship to "the law." The terminology "you rest or rely upon the law" may be similar to what we say about ourselves: "we are a nation of laws." In the case of the Jews, A. T. Robertson (Greek scholar) writes "It is a picture of blind and mechanical reliance on the Mosaic law." We might state this simply as "they were very legalistic" in their practices related to the law. All of us can appreciate that Jesus spoke against such "legalism" in favor of conducting ourselves according to the "spirit of the law."

The third point Paul wrote about in verse seventeen was that they "boast (glory) in God." We would normally think that this is a good thing to do. We ought to ascribe all the blessings of nature and grace to the Lord alone, and praise him for all that we enjoy. However, according to John Gill's commentary, the "boasting here spoken of, was such that was not right; these men boasted of their bare external knowledge of the one God, when the Gentiles around them were ignorant of him; of their being the covenant people of God, when others were aliens and strangers; and of their having the word and worship of the true God, which other nations were unacquainted with; and, on these external things they depended, which was their fault." In other word, Paul saw their "boast in God" as superficial or just a facade. We can certainly see such superficiality among many in the church today.

As a result of these three faulty attitudes they had, they had a lot of confidence in themselves and in their ability to tell everyone else how to shape up and do things the way "it ought to be done" when they themselves did not practice what they preached. If we looked closely into the lives of those who are called "Christians" in our nation, we can probably find some (more than a few) who do not "practice what they preach."

What do we sense is the prevailing attitude of many in our nation today with regard to what the Bible teaches, with regard to honoring the name of God, or having a positive reaction when someone mentions Jesus? The teachings of the word of God are thought to be out-of-date and not applicable to the world in which we live today. If someone mentions God or especially if the name of Jesus comes up, there is strong criticism directed toward the person who would dare bring up something as irrelevant as religious beliefs. As Christians we get the idea that we and what we teach do not matter at all, anymore. It is almost as if we are not even present until a group is needed for disaster relief but we better not use that situation to lead anyone to Christ. It is almost as if we have been exiled. We haven't been carried away to Babylon, but we have been occupied by Babylon which has taken over everything and we have been assigned to a very limited area of influence such as "community church buildings" and "disaster relief activities."

When this happened to the Jews circa 600 B.C., they asked the question, why is this happening to us? The prophecy of Isaiah (100 years before) anticipated this question and provided an answer which we find in Isaiah 52:5. The answer was to the question of the Jews in

exile of “why are we here and in such a mess?” The answer given was a question from God that they needed to answer. That question was “Do you think it was for nothing that you were exiled and those who rule over you mock you?” He then added, “It is because of you that My name is constantly blasphemed.”

It is appropriate to say that the sorry (moral) situation that we find in our nation today is because the church failed to implement and carry out the principles of the Kingdom of God in our lives and in the communities in which we lived? Did we get caught up and distracted with arguing about subtleties in doctrines and certain practices and what we should wear to church and whether or not long hair was appropriate or whether this, that or the other mattered as opposed to rescuing the perishing, caring for the dying, lifting up the fallen, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, providing shelter for the homeless, and things of this nature that the secular government stepped in and brought Babylonian occupation with it? The invasion was accomplished and many people conquered simply by giving people “free stuff.”

Obedience Required – 2:25-27

²⁵ 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. ²⁶ So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? ²⁷ And 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? Romans 2:25–27 (NASB95)

When our emphasis is on ritual, then we can miss the significance of the portrayed reality. A distinction that was a point of concern to the Jewish believers in the early church was related to the ritual of circumcision and this distinctive was emphasized so much that the Jews were named or called “the circumcision.” The benefits of being in that group did not come from the physical situation associated with that particular name but were a result of what they did with regard to observing the commandments, precepts and principles of the Law. These same benefits accrued to anyone who observed or practiced the precepts regardless of whether they had participated in the ritual or not. In fact, Paul made the claim that non-Jewish people who were obedient would, by their obedience, bring judgment on those who were advantaged in their Jewishness when they (the Jews) failed to be obedient. This argument supports what Paul had written in verse thirteen of this chapter: “For it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.” We can have all the proper doctrinal subtleties correct to the most minute points, and have performed all the rituals in the proper manner and still miss the point of what God is doing in the Church.

We would be very remiss if we did not look for a correlation of what Paul wrote to the Jewish believers in Rome about their rituals to the rituals we have today in the church. Dare we name the rituals that we dutifully carry out without fully embracing the reality portrayed by the rituals? We might list the Lord Supper as one of the rituals we do on a recurring basis. Some groups do this annually, some quarterly, some weekly and others continually. We recognize baptism as a one-time observance or ritual. Some groups include penance as a recognized ritual in which there is confession of sin to the priest and forgiveness granted by the priest. Some also would list marriage, ordination of clergy, and anointing of the sick in their recognized rituals. It is very possible for people to go through the actions of the rituals without any thought regarding the spiritual reality being portrayed.

If we were to pick out one ritual that would be distinctive for Christians in the way circumcision was distinctive for the Jews, it would probably be baptism. Now with that in mind, let’s read what Paul told those early Jewish believers in Rome about their distinctive ritual.

Heart Recognized – 2:28-29

²⁸ For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. ²⁹ 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. Romans 2:28–29 (NASB95)

If we were to rewrite these verses to apply it to the church and the relationship of a Christian and baptism it might be along these lines. A person not a true Christian just because he or she has decided to become a member of a local church. True baptism that is called for in our Christian walk is not just being dipped in or sprinkled with water while a minister says the words “I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” That ceremony or ritual is simply a testimony of what should have happened to you when you placed your faith in God’s means of salvation in which Christ Jesus took your sins upon Himself and died in your place and you have died (with Him) to your old nature and been born anew of the Spirit of God and then raised to walk in newness of His life within you. This ritual is simply a witness to the world that you have begun a process in which you are being constantly immersed in the character of the Triune God so that you are becoming more and more like Jesus in such a way that your very life points to God as the Source of all you are.

Being a Jew in name only (circumcised) and having a superficial connection to the law and to having the name of being “God’s chosen people” will prove to be insufficient. In the same way, being a Christian in name only (baptized) and having a superficial connection to the reality of the indwelling Holy Spirit and even being recognized as a member of a local church will prove to be insufficient. If our faith does not produce works of faith, then it was a faulty faith from the start and it will fail us in the call to daily “die to self” and to “take up our cross and follow Jesus” Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.