**Romans**

**Lesson 4: The Idolatry of Religion Romans 2:17-29**

In his letter to the Romans, Paul acts as a courtroom prosecutor, leveling charges against those who deserve God’s judgment, and no one escapes his verbal assault. Not the pagan (1:18-32). Not the moralist (2:1-16). Not even the self-righteous, religious Jew (2:17-29). Paul reveals how pagans suppress the truth concerning God’s existence. Subsequently, pagans turn away from God, choosing to go their own way and live independently of God. In the words of Anne Graham Lotz, “God is a gentleman,” so He lets them go their own way and do what ought not to be done. As pagans move further and further away from God, their sins become more egregious until they finally reach the point of total depravity. In that state, they can no longer discern between right and wrong, between good and evil.

Meanwhile, the moralist stands by in judgment, not realizing he is just as guilty because he commits the same sins. Because of their sins, both the pagan and the moralist are storing up wrath against themselves for the day of God’s judgment, which is fast approaching. On that day, God will give them what they deserve. Because they rejected God, He will reject them. God’s judgment is certain, and it is coming. All of this will take place on the day when God judges men’s secrets through Jesus Christ, which is what the gospel declares (2:16).

In verses 17-29, Paul turns his attention to the religious Jews who stand in judgment of everyone. Jews have many reasons to be proud. First, they were chosen by God to be His light to the world. Next, they were given the Law through Moses at Mount Sinai. Moreover, knowing the Word of God they know His will. They enjoy a very privileged position. *Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ* (Romans 9:4-5). From this lofty position, they look down in judgment on everyone; yet they do not realize that they too are separated from God due to their sin. In their blindness, they do not see who they really are—sinners in need of a Savior.

Religious people today are nearly identical to the Jews of Paul’s day. Paul describes people who are morally decent and religiously active. Their outward appearance is good. They are respected in their communities. They seem to obey all of the laws. They are very proud of who they are. They may even claim to be Christians, becoming indignant if their Christianity is questioned. They believe that God will accept them because of their inherent goodness, moral lifestyle, and religious activity. Keller writes,

Moralism is extremely common, and always has been. It is the biggest religion in the world today. It is the religion of people who compare themselves with others, who notice that they are “a lot more decent than other people,” and conclude: If there is a God, he’ll certainly accept me. I’m a good person.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The real problem with moralism and religious activity arises when people rely on them for salvation. Just as moralism and religious activity formed a system of salvation for the Jews, they have become a system for people today who rely on their “goodness” and church membership to make them acceptable to God. But the inherent problem with both moralism and religious activity is that neither can change the heart, and that is what God cares about most—a changed heart. Keller writes,

So what if you are a church member? This only counts for anything if there has been a real change in your life, if your heart has been truly affected. Don’t you know that you are not a Christian if you are only one externally, that real Christianity is not about having confidence in external things? No, a Christian is someone who is Christian inside; what matters is inner baptism, a heart-membership of God’s people. And this is a supernatural work, not a human one.[[2]](#footnote-2)

God is more concerned about man’s heart than his outward appearance. First Samuel 16:7 states, “But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at a person as man does. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.’” Hence, church attendance alone does not impress God. Religious activity without a changed heart has never impressed God. The prophet Isaiah, who lived about 700 years before Christ, wrote: “The Lord says, ‘These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men”’ (29:13). Isaiah’s words are relevant to our day and culture.

In Romans 2:25, Paul mentions a word that was very important to the Jews—circumcision. In Genesis 17, God established a covenantal relationship with Abraham and his descendants through the rite of circumcision. God required that every male who descended from Abraham be circumcised on the eighth day. Through circumcision, God marked the Jews as His chosen people—a people who belonged to Him.

Why circumcision? What did it really signify? Circumcision reminded the Jews that if they did not remain faithful and obedient to God, then just as their foreskins were cut off, they too would be cut off from God. Sadly, history reveals that the Jews were unfaithful and disobedient and, as promised, they became separated from God. They were cut off. Although they were marked outwardly as belonging to God, inwardly they were far from him. Paul expounds, “Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised” (2:25). Therein lies the rub. No one can keep the law. Therefore, circumcision has no real value.

Today, many religious people point to outward signs such as baptism, church attendance, rituals, prayer and confirmation as indications, or signs, of their inclusion in God’s family. But God is not really interested in any of these outward signs if there has been no inner heart change. God is looking for a circumcised heart—a heart that has been cut by the Spirit, not by the written code (2:29). God is pleased when He sees a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17). The true sign of belonging to God is not some outward mark on the physical body but rather an inner mark upon the heart that has been “cut” by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13).

DAY 1 . Read Romans 2:17-24.

1. About whom does Paul speak in these verses (religious people or pagans)?
2. List six things the Jews were proud of when it came to how they lived, their moral goodness, and who they were:
3. Verse 17 -
4. Verse 17 -
5. Verse 17 -
6. Verse 18 -
7. Verse 18 -
8. Verse 19 -
9. What is the chief of sins?

Proverbs 6:16-19

Daniel 5:20

Luke 18:9-14

1. Why is pride such a deadly sin? How does it lead to every other sin (Genesis 3:5; 1 Timothy 3:6; 1 John 2:15-17)?

DAY 2 . Read Romans 2:17-24.

1. According to verses 21-23, of what were the religious Jews guilty?
2. Billy Graham once said, “*Religion is like the vaccine that stops you from getting the real thing*.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Explain.
3. Read Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28. How did Jesus raise the bar?

DAYS 3 and 4. Read Romans 2:25-29.

1. Circumcision was an outward sign that a Jew was a descendant of Abraham, and thus, belonged to God’s family. Scripture teaches clearly that God is not impressed with outward appearances. What do you learn from the following passages?

1 Samuel 16:7

Isaiah 29:13

1. How would you define a “circumcised heart?”

Deuteronomy 30:6

Psalm 51:16-17

Jeremiah 24:7

Ezekiel 36:26-27

Romans 2:29 (“and circumcision is circumcision of the heart”)

1. Read the following verses and explain:

Galatians 5:6

Galatians 6:15; 2 Corinthians 5:17

Colossians 2:11

1. Why is it impossible for the “written code” (the Law—the Ten Commandments) to circumcise the heart (v. 29)? (See also Romans 7:5; Galatians 3:2-5, 10-14, 19, 21, 24)
2. Read 2 Corinthians 1:21-22 along with Ephesians 1:13-14.
3. Who circumcises the heart?
4. When does “circumcision of the heart” take place?
5. As you examine your own heart, how do you see yourself? Pagan? Moralist? Religious man? True believer? At this point in the study of Romans, how would you define what it really means to be a Christian?

According to Stott,

In his redefinition of what it means to be a Jew, an authentic member of God’s covenant people, then, Paul draws a fourfold contrast. First, the essence of being a true Jew (who may indeed be ethnically a Gentile) is not something outward and visible, but inward and invisible. For the true circumcision is, secondly, in the heart, not the flesh. Thirdly, it is effected by the Spirit, not the law, and fourthly, it wins the approval of God rather than human beings. Human beings are comfortable with what is outward, visible, material,   
and superficial. What matters to God is a deep, inward, secret work of the Holy Spirit   
in our hearts.

Moreover, what Paul writes here about circumcision and being a Jew could also be said about baptism and being a Christian. The real Christian, like the real Jew, is one inwardly; and the true baptism, like the true circumcision, is in the heart and by the Spirit.[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. Keller, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Martin H. Manser, *The Westminster Collection of Christian Quotations* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2001), 313. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Stott, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)