

Romans Session 33

The False Security of Ceremony

Romans 2:25-29 (NASB)

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?*

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.*

Paul here is proceeding to a third type of false security (**circumcision**) in which many Jews placed their trust, Paul clarifies the true significance of that rite.

God had instituted **circumcision** as a mark of His covenant with Abraham and his descendants, declaring that;

Genesis 17:10-12 (NASB)

¹⁰ *"This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised.*

¹¹ *"And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.*

¹² *"And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants.*

Centuries later, when for some reason Moses failed to circumcise one of his sons, his wife Zipporah, performed the rite herself, thereby protecting Moses from the Lord's wrath,

Exodus 4:24-26 (NASB)

²⁴ *Now it came about at the lodging place on the way that the LORD met him (Moses) and sought to put him to death.*

²⁵ *Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and threw it at Moses' feet, and she said, "You are indeed a bridegroom of blood to me."*

²⁶ *So He let him alone. At that time she said, "You are a bridegroom of blood"—because of the circumcision.*

No doubt this surgery was symbolic of the sinfulness of man that was passed from generation to generation... The very procreative organ needed to be cleansed of a covering.

So man at the very center of his nature is sinful and needs cleansing of the heart. This graphic symbol of the need for removing sin became the sign of being a Jew.

But as important as circumcision was as an act of obedience to God and as a reminder to Jews of their covenant relation to Him, the rite had no spiritual power.

Circumcision is of value, Paul explains, only **if you practice the Law**, that is, live in obedience to God's will. To the faithful, obedient Jew, **circumcision** was a symbol of God's covenant, His blessings, His goodness, and His protection of His chosen people.

But if you are a transgressor of the Law, Paul warned, **your circumcision has become un-circumcision**, that is, valueless.

A Jew who continually transgressed God's law proved that he had no more saving relationship to God than a pagan Gentile, whom Jews often referred to as the un-circumcised.

Important as it was, **circumcision** was only an outward symbol.

And rather than freeing Jews from God's law, **circumcision** made them even more responsible for obeying it, because that ritual testified to their greater knowledge of their sin, of God, and of His will in regard to them.

Circumcision was, in fact, more a mark of judgment and obligation than of salvation and freedom. It was a constant reminder to Jews of their sinfulness and of their obligation to obey God's law.

Speaking about the Judaizers, who were corrupting the church by teaching that Christians were obligated to keep the Mosaic Law, Paul wrote,

Galatians 5:3 (NASB)

³ *And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law.*

Circumcision was a mark of legal obligation.

Long before Paul's day the rite of circumcision had become so shrouded in superstition that ancient rabbis formulated sayings such as, "No circumcised Jewish man will see hell" and "Circumcision saves us from hell."

The Midrash includes the statement, "**God swore to Abraham that no one who was circumcised would be sent to hell. Abraham sits before the gate of hell and never allows any circumcised Israelite to enter**"

The prophets however, made it very clear that mere physical circumcision had no spiritual power or benefit.

Jeremiah 9:25-26 (NASB)

²⁵ *"Behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "that I will punish all who are circumcised and yet uncircumcised—*

²⁶ *Egypt and Judah, and Edom and the sons of Ammon, and Moab and all those inhabiting the desert who clip the hair on their temples; for all the nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised of heart."*

Disobedience to God put the circumcised Israelites in the same category of judgment as the uncircumcised Gentiles.

On the other hand, Paul continues,

Romans 2:25-29 (NASB)

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?*

The apostle's point is that the substance of pleasing God is obedience to His will, of which circumcision is but a symbolic reminder.

Sincerely keeping **the requirement of the Law** because it is God's will is of great value, whereas circumcision without obedience is of absolutely no value.

If the uncircumcised man, that is, a Gentile, **keeps the requirement of the Law**, God will look on him just as favorably as on the circumcised Jew who keeps His law, counting the believing Gentile's **un-circumcision** as if it were true circumcision.

Paul's next devastating salvo at the Jew who had false trust in his Jewish privileges was the declaration that the obedient Gentile who is **physically uncircumcised** not only pleases God but figuratively will sit in judgment on the disobedient Jews, **who though having the letter of the Law and physical circumcision are a transgressor of the Law.**

It is not that such Gentiles will perform the actual Judgment, which is God's prerogative alone, but that their faithful obedience will stand as a rebuke to the faithless disobedience of hypocritical Jews.

Listen to what Paul says to the Philippian Gentile church about the unsaved and disobedient Jews,

Philippians 3:2 (NASB)

² *Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision;*

Theologian Charles Hodge wrote,

"Whenever true religion declines, the disposition to lay undo stress on external rites is stressed. The Jews when they lost their spirituality supposed that circumcision had the power to save them,"

Apostasy always moves the religious focus from the inward to the outward, from humble obedience to empty formality.

In verses 28-29 Paul summarizes his demolition of false trust.

First, he reiterates that Jewish heritage, wonderful as it was, had absolutely no spiritual benefit if it stood alone: **He is not a Jew who is one outwardly.**

As John the Baptist had pronounced many years earlier, God could raise up *physical* descendants of Abraham from stones if He so chose (*Matt 3:9*)

Making much the same point, later in his epistle Paul contends;

Romans 9:6 (NASB)

⁶ *But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel;*

Second, Paul reemphasizes the truth that ceremony is of no value in itself, saying, **Neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh.**

Putting those two truths together, the apostle says that the true child of God, epitomized by the faithful **Jew**, is the person **who is one inwardly**.

The true mark of God's child is not an outward symbol, such as **circumcision**, but a godly condition **of the heart**.

Third, Paul restates the truth that knowledge of God's law has no power to save a person.

Salvation comes **by the Spirit** of God Himself working in a believer's heart, not by the mere **letter** of His Word. True as it is.

The **praise** that the true Jew, the true believer, receives **is not from men**, who are more inclined to ridicule God's people than to praise them.

The true believers reward of praise comes directly **from God**, His heavenly Father.

So Paul concludes His challenge to the Jews and to their false securities. He will now take on the advantage of being Jewish. One would wonder after all of this what advantage the Jewish person might have especially when you look at their tragic history. Pau however take this on when we come back to our study next time.