

Religiosity Versus Reality! Romans 2:17-29, 1 Samuel 16:6-12

Portions adapted from "Religion Without Reality," Don Emmitte @ SermonCentral.com

Five hundred years ago, this October, a normally very fearful Catholic monk became so upset that he posted on the University door a 95 point protest over his Church's departures from Biblical Christianity. At first the Church tried to silence him, then kill him, then it just kicked him out and the Protestant Reformation was born.

This monk, of course, was Martin Luther, and 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation which began with his act of protest. Not surprisingly, that which transformed him from a fearful priest to a powerful reformer was his study of the book of Romans.

So, it is a good thing we are also reading through Romans this year, because both on a personal and corporate level the Church and many Christians once again have departed from Biblical Christianity and once again seem to be counting on religiosity versus reality when it comes to living out their faith.

What is "religiosity" you ask? Religiosity is having the form but not the substance of religion; like a hollow old oak tree, behind the outside bark and a bit of surface wood there is just rot and emptiness. In the same way, religiosity attempts to maintain the exterior appearance without the inner heart. That is exactly what today's text from Romans is all about.

Hopefully you will remember from when we began this study in the Fall, that the first half of Paul's letter to the Romans is basically an extended evangelistic message; with Paul very carefully presenting the Gospel while answering any opposing arguments to it. The good news that Paul would have you accept is that it is not our striving to be righteous but rather living by faith in God's gift of righteousness that saves us. The key verse to this entire first half of Romans being

"The one who is righteous will live by faith." Romans 1:17

Paul began in Chapter one, by very carefully describing what it was about sin which brings God's wrath upon those who choose to live that way. There he declares that sin is first ignoring the knowledge of Himself that God built into us so that we might live as we please. But when we ignore this internal knowledge of God and God's laws, we open ourselves to a downward moral spiral that ends us with a debased mind—no longer even caring what's right or wrong.

They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.

Romans 1:32

And, now that we religious people are all thoroughly scandalized by what those bad people are doing and deserving, Paul turns to us and asks, "***and do you think you are any better off? Do you think religion will save you?***" Even we, good religious people, are still sinners needing to accept God's offered salvation by faith alone; only then can the reality of our faith endorse our religious lifestyle.

Which is the challenge that today's portion of Romans lays before us:

Is your Christianity real or merely religiosity?

Good question.

Let's answer this question by questioning three standard religiosity practices:

membership, ritual, and badges.

So you call you self a Jew- Christian?

And boast in your relation to God?

(2:17)

First Religiosity values membership over relationship. (2:17-22)

Paul asks us: **Do you think that wearing the name Jew (or Christian) by itself can make you acceptable to God?** Apparently many people do. Those proudly showing their Jewish/Christian membership cards still are sinners in need of God's grace. And to prove this point, Paul uses the most religious people in the world as a case study.

The Jewish man of Paul's day was sincerely devoted to his religious beliefs and practices. And the Pharisaic sect of Judaism had turned religiosity, the outward form of religion, into an art form! Just to see a Pharisee walk down a street, you could tell this was a religious person. Yet, in reality their religion by itself was hollow. Jesus had once called this crowd whitewashed sepulchers (burial vaults); looking good on the outside but having no real life on the inside (Matthew 23.27).

These were a people quite proud that God had chosen to reveal Himself to their nation in a unique way. They saw themselves as members of a very exclusive Jewish club.

And they thought—with regard to their own salvation—that membership had its privileges.

When President Obama recently visited with the Japanese Prime Minister he saw sitting on his desk a golden telephone. And when Obama asked about it, Shinzō Abe informed him that it was his direct line to God. Wondering why he didn't have such a phone, Obama asked if he could call God and was graciously invited to do so. But Shinzō Abe warned him that it was a very long distance call and would be quite expensive. So Obama made his call to God, got his answer and paid the very steep bill with taxpayer dollars.

A few months later when he was confronting Russian President Vladimir Putin about hacking our elections he saw the same golden phone, and was grudgingly assured that it too was a direct line to God, but again warned that using it could be quite expensive. Since the atmosphere here was rather tense Obama decided to save his money.

But then recently while talking with Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel, Obama again saw the same golden phone and said—man, I have got to get one of these for the Oval Office. So Obama once again asked if he could use the golden phone to God, assuring the Prime Minister that he would cover the cost, to which Netanyahu replied, *go right ahead, it's not expensive at all...it's a local call.*

Sseriously, in Paul's day, that is how many Jews understood their relationship with God. Having been born into God's club, there was little else they thought needed to stay there. But as always is the case, like that old oak, when the heart of faith is lost all they had left was the hollow shell. Though the Jews had a true religious form, and even the Jewish club card, it was in many cases only an outward practice not an inward reality. They, like us, like every single individual, were still in need of the righteousness which only God could give them through Jesus Christ.

The same is true for us Christians. So many people think that their Christian Club card is sufficient to keep them "saved." **In an ABC/Beliefnet poll taken just this summer, 83% of Americans still identify themselves as Christian, yet only a few said that this belief made any difference in way they lived.** And from earlier polls, while 40% claimed to attend church weekly, the reality is that only between 12 and 20% are actually in church on any given Sunday. Like the Jews of Paul's day, many Christians today apparently rely solely on their club card to take care of all matters related to God and their eternal destiny.

This club card attitude becomes even more evident when churches try to clean their membership rolls. In the good-old days the PCUSA maintained an "inactive member

list” and many people seemed quite content to live all their lives on that list. You would be surprised at the number of people who, when we meet, tell me “I am a member of your Church”; people whom I have never seen inside this Church in the 10 years I have been pastor here. Well the PCUSA did something right a few years back, they eliminated the inactive roll. Now you are either an active member (still with a wide range of qualifications), or you are not a member. And each church is annually charged with keeping the rolls up to date. So, the hardest visits I have to make, the hardest letters to write, are those asking these people who have ceased to be active in church whether they wish to return to real active membership or be removed from the list. And their standard response is, “**are you kicking me out of church?**”

No, we are not. We are just acknowledging the reality of choices they have made. Besides, it is not our membership roll that anyone has to worry about. I doubt that God’s family membership list, known as the Book of Life, even has a denominational category. God has no interest in if I am a member of this Presbyterian Church or that Baptist Church. In the same way the label I claim—Christian or Jewish—is not something I can wear only on the outside, because, as God told Samuel, that is not where He is looking.

[or] If you rely on the Law ...
Having in the Law the
embodiment
Of knowledge and truth.
(2:17, 20)

Secondly, religiosity prioritizes knowledge over practice (2:23-24). Many people erroneously place great faith in their own religious effort to make them acceptable before God. But we need to know that religious activity can never replace inner reality.

We are not declared righteous by God based on our religious knowledge or practice. If this were true then the Jews would have certainly been righteous. Every Jewish person learned the laws of God from their earliest childhood. They knew what God required. They could easily distinguish between good and evil, moral and immoral.

However, like Christians today, many Jews made the tragic mistake of becoming so adept at telling others about how a believer ought to behave, that they came to believe that behavior was all they needed. **Rather than enhancing their faith, right behavior replaced right belief.**

You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

2:23-24

Worse still, as evidence of their debased thinking, they developed a double standard: excusing themselves from the same sins they taught were unacceptable to God. They had the talk, but not the walk. Or to misquote Billy Crystal, they thought it was better to look good than to do what is right.

Many Christians now make the same mistake. **But, acting godly without having the inner reality of our faith in God, makes us a hypocrite.** And as Paul pointed out, the only ones fooled by such a hollow moralistic lifestyle are the ones living it. Others, seeing the hypocrisy, wrongly blame God for our actions (think of Saturday Night Live's famous church lady skits). If that is what Christianity looks like, I don't want any part of it.

The error of the moralist is that they think God will accept them based on their knowledge or lifestyle. But, in divorcing right knowledge from a right relationship with God, they remain in bondage to sin. Paul will make this very clear in the next chapter, since all have sinned, the same wage all have earned is death. We just cannot ever perform well enough with mere knowledge or behavior to earn salvation. **Whether deepest sinner or greatest saint we are all still dependent upon a salvation that God graciously gives to us; which we can only accept by faith, never by performance.**

There is an interesting apocryphal story that comes out of the early church; it is not found in Scripture but it does illustrate how easy it can be for any of us to focus on personal endeavor rather than a faithful relationship.

The story begins with Jesus and the disciples walking from Galilee to Judea, a lengthy and strenuous walk. They find themselves walking along a stony road. Jesus asks each of the disciples to pick up a stone to carry. It is said that John picked up a large stone while Peter found little more than a pebble sized stone. At the top of one particularly steep trail since they were nearing the end of the day, Peter took Jesus aside and asked him where they were going to find food. Jesus then gathered them all around him and commanded the stones they were carrying to be turned to bread so they could have something to eat. Of course Peter's little bit of bread was not sufficient to satisfy his hunger. So John shared

some of his with him as they prepared for the evening's rest. The next morning Jesus again asked each of them to pick up a stone to carry. This time Peter chose the largest stone of all. Later coming to a river, Jesus told them to cast the stones into the water. They looked at one another in bewilderment as they still had another long day's journey ahead of them. When Peter began to question Jesus, he replied, "For whom did you carry the stone?"

They had a religious experience; however, they did not have reality in their religion. They had a position without any relationship. At this point, their religion like so many who have relied on ritual or lifestyle was empty and without eternal significance.

So the reality of our faith is found in neither a name nor a lifestyle, neither is it found in any badges. But religiosity relies on badges over reality. (vs. 25-29)

Circumcision indeed has value if you obey the Law. But if you break the Law, your circumcision becomes un-circumcision.
(2:25)

Did you notice the "**yes I believe in God**" pin I'm wearing today? I got it in 1999 right after the Columbine High School massacre, in solidarity with those Christian teens who bravely professed their faith even while being taunted by their shooters. I wore it regularly for a while hoping someone would ask me about my faith, but no one did. That is often the problem with badges. Either people know us too well to believe the badge, or to doubt the badge. Since I was very well known as a pastor in the small town of Midway, I hope it was the latter rather than the former that kept them from asking about my badge.

The Jewish people had a very distinctive badge—of which they were quite proud: circumcision. It was the mark made in every Jewish boy's flesh when he was eight days old. He gloried in this. It was his sign that he was truly acceptable before God. Many fully expected at the Day of Judgment this would be the only requirement necessary for entrance into God's kingdom. Paul makes it clear how wrong this belief was.

For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart (2:28-29)

Today, while the rituals and outward badges are different, our tendency to trust in such external displays of faith, are the same. Like the Jews of Paul's day, a surprising number of people are trusting in "religiosity," the outward form of the Christian religion while lacking the inward reality of a genuine relationship with Christ. Jewish or Christian, God is not fooled by any of these external names, rituals, or badges, because God sees what is in our heart.

So, without a relationship with Christ such rituals are meaningless, empty, and even destructive both for the wearer and for others who falsely identify them as representing real religion. However, for the real Christian, for those living in a faithful relationship with God, such practices—proudly claiming the name, living the lifestyle, wearing the badge—can be a very positive experience both for them and others they meet.

R. C. Sproul tells of a time when Billy Graham was invited to play golf with President Ford and two PGA tour professionals.

After the round of golf was finished, another pro came up to one the pros and asked, *"Hey, what was it like playing with the President and with Billy Graham?"* The pro unleashed a torrent of cursing, and in a disgusted manner said, *"I don't need Billy Graham stuffing religion down my throat."*

With that he turned on his heel and stormed off, heading for the practice tee to drive a bucket of balls into the wind. His friend followed. . . . Saying nothing, he sat on the bench and watched. After a few minutes the anger of the pro was spent. He settled down. His friend asked quietly, *"Was Billy a little rough on you out there?"* The pro heaved an embarrassed sigh and said, *"No, he didn't even mention religion. I just had a bad round."*

About the incident Sproul concludes: Astonishing. . . . Billy Graham is so identified with religion, so associated with the things of God, that his very presence is enough to smother *the wicked man who flees when no man pursues*. Luther had it right, the pagan does tremble at the rustling of a leaf. He feels the hound of heaven breathing down his neck. He feels crowded by holiness even if it is only made present by an imperfect, partially sanctified human vessel (R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1985, pp. 91-93).

Being proudly identified as Christian, following the rules, wearing the badge, all these can be really beneficial if you support them by the reality of your faith in God and your desire to grow as Christ's disciple. But they serve as no replacement for the real thing. So if you are faking it, the only one you are fooling is yourself.

Amen?