

The Deadly Danger of Religion

Romans 2:17-29

Philosopher Michel de Montaigne once said, “I find no quality so easy to counterfeit as religious devotion.” We know that to be true, don’t we? We’ve all known people who seemed to be so religious that they were intolerable to be around. We have all seen or heard of famous preachers being caught having affairs or embezzling church funds. Most of us have known religious hypocrites. Of course that term could never apply to any of us. Or could it?

In the early chapters of Romans Paul has been demonstrating the universal guilt of mankind. He is showing us why we need the gospel of Jesus Christ. In succession, he takes up the case of various groups and shows how each one is truly guilty of sin before God. In Romans 1:18-32 Paul begins with Gentiles who are guilty of blatant disobedience. Then in Romans 2:1-16 he pronounces the moralist guilty of counterfeit obedience. Now in Romans 2:17-29, he comes to the third and final group, the Jews. Paul, himself a Hebrew of Hebrews, goes after his own religious people and demonstrates that even the Jew is a sinner who stands guilty before God.

The Jews were the toughest group to deal with precisely because they were so deeply devoted to their religious tradition. Religion can be deadly dangerous. It is possible to be religious and not a Christian. Jesus cautioned the Jews of His day against dressing up the outside with religion in order to hide the spiritual decay and death on the inside. He declared in Matthew 23:27: ***Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.***

Graves were painted white every year so no one would accidentally touch a tomb and be declared unclean. Those involved in ritual and religion were nicely painted on the outside but were actually dead on the inside, and in their deadness, they were defiling others.

Religion can be deadly dangerous. I want us to see some of the dangers of being religious here in Romans 2. First,

1. Religion Breeds Pride (Rom. 2:17-18).

The first deadly danger of religion is pride. In Romans 2:17-18, we see that the Jewish people had advantages that ultimately led to arrogance:

17 Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God,

18 and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law,

The Jews knew that they were God’s chosen people and they were very proud of it. They were proud of the name “Jew.” When they introduced themselves in the first century, they often added the name “Jew” after their name: “Simon Bar-Joseph, Jew.”

Jews were also called *Hebrews* because of the language they spoke and *Israelites* because of the land they were given. But by the time of Christ, the most common name they had was that of *Jew*, which was derived from Judah, the name of one of the twelve tribes. The name “Jew” denoted their own distinctiveness, as separate from those around them.

In the same way, many modern day churchgoers pride themselves in their names: Conservative, Evangelical, Christian, and Baptist just to name a few that might apply to us. Some brag on a preacher or writer or a certain Bible College or seminary. Listen, when people are steeped in religion, they talk about names and churches; when people are steeped in true Christianity, they talk about Jesus.

Paul mentions five other advantages the Jews had:

A. They had the Law of God.

God had spoken true truth to Moses and to the prophets and had given His commands in the form of the Law. The Jews alone had that Law. They were known as “people of the book.”

B. They had a boast in God.

The Jew was a worshiper of the only true God. He knew God in a way that none of the pagans knew God. He was able to worship God in the way which He ordained that He be worshiped.

C. They knew God’s will.

The Jew had the Scriptures of the Old Testament. He had God’s message in written form. The most precious communication in history had been placed into his hands and written in his language.

D. They could approve the things that are essential.

The Jew had the capacity through his knowledge of the will of God to determine between... Good and evil. Moral and immoral. Ethical and unethical.

E. They were instructed out of the Law.

Paul had grown up in a Jewish family and had the knowledge of God taught to him as a young child. He had spent his childhood in the synagogue, being taught by the rabbis. He could quote the law of God. Many of the Jews were just like Paul had been.

These advantages were actually good things but when they started to brag about their special position, pride set in. They were like the puffed up Pharisee in Luke 18:11: ***The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men--extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.***

Because he only prayed *about himself*, he thought he was better than those around him, believing that his sin didn’t smell as bad as others. The Jews religious privileges had made them self-righteous, self-centered and self-deceived religious snobs. Privilege can lead to pride which often leads to the next danger of religion: presumption.

2. Religion often leans to Presumption (Rom. 2:19-20).

Religious people often presume to lead and teach others. They get pleasure out of telling others what to do. We read in Romans 2:19-20:

19 and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness,

20 an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law.

When pride captures our heart, we then feel compelled to act like presumptive prophets by focusing on others, making people know how much we know. God’s people had

been given the responsibility to reach out to the pagan nations around them. This goes all the way back to the blessing given to Abraham when he was told in Genesis 12:3 that **“all peoples on earth”** would be blessed through him. Isaiah 42:6 says that they were to be: **“a light for the Gentiles.”**

They saw themselves as...

A guide for the blind

A light for those in the dark

An instructor for the foolish

A teacher of infants

Now, before we move on, let me say that these are all good things. After all, the blind do need guides, those in darkness need light, and the foolish desperately need instructors. Certainly infants need teachers. That's what the Jews claimed to be.

But, because they were not living the law themselves, to use the words of Jesus in Matthew 23:24, they were **“blind guides.”** Their pride filled them with presumption and so they acted like prophets to other people, but in reality they were just pretenders.

3. Religion encourages Pretenders (Rom. 2:21-22).

They were quick to find fault with others while quickly forgiving their own. Take a look at Romans 2:21-22:

21 You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal?

22 You who say, "Do not commit adultery," do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

They loved to point out the problems that others had, but they were in the group Jesus warned others about in Matthew 23:3, ***Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do.***

These would be very shocking charges to the Jews who boasted about their religion. Religious people are good at telling others what to do, but often they are not very good at doing it themselves.

I read this week about brother Brighton. He was a pompous man who was meticulous about his appearance, holding fast to many religious rules. He was a member of the most prestigious church in town and was very bothered by the behavior of the boys in his church so he decided to become their Sunday School teacher. On his first day of class, he decided to begin by teaching the boys the importance of living the Christian life so he asked them this question: *“Why do people call me a Christian.”* After an awkward pause, one young boy piped up and said, *“Maybe it's because they don't know you.”*

4. Religion often ends in Profaning (Rom. 2:23-24).

Once pride takes root, we become filled with presumption and start blasting others, when in fact we're just pretenders who end up profaning the holy name of God. This can have disastrous consequences in two areas. First, verse 23 states: **“You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law?”** Notice the use of the word “boast” again. Their pride led to their downfall

because they were now dishonoring the very God they claimed to be serving. Second, once we profane God, we end up pushing other people away from Him. Our behavior can cause others to blaspheme. *When we dishonor God, those who watch us can end up despising God.*

We see this in Romans 3:24: **For "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you," as it is written.**

This is a quote from Isaiah 52:5 together with Ezekiel 36:22. God's people were in captivity in Babylon because of sin. As a result, those around them thought God was unable to deliver them and so they mocked the Almighty.

Friends, it's no small matter to dishonor God by our behavior. Our lives are moral megaphones to a listening world because people believe what they behold. When Nathan confronted David for his sin with Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 12:14, he made a very strong statement: **...By doing this you have made the enemies of the LORD show utter contempt...**

What happened to the Jews should warn us today to guard against the deadly dangers of pride, presumption, pretending and profaning.

Choosing Relationship over Religion

Left to ourselves we will choose religion over relationship, form over faith, and profession in the place of possession. Ultimately, it comes down to making one of two choices.

Choice #1: We can try to prove our religion by outward signs (Rom. 2:25-27).

Paul now goes after the one sign in which the Jew prided himself as a member of the covenant – circumcision. For the Jew, circumcision was a holy mark on the body, a physical reminder that he belonged exclusively to God. Unfortunately, this rite had become the supreme symbol for Jewish superiority.

Romans 2:25-27

25 For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.

26 Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision?

27 And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you who, even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law?

While circumcision was an important sign for the Jew, it was not a ticket to heaven. We fall into the same trap when we think that an outward sign like baptism or communion or church membership somehow saves us. Remember this: *The ritual without the reality is rubbish.* In Philippians 3 after Paul tells about all his religious advantages he says in verses 7-8, **But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ.**

Have you been trusting in a religion or do you have a relationship with Christ?

Choice #2: Praise our Redeemer through inward spirituality (Rom. 2:28-29).

Paul wraps up his argument in [Romans 2:28-29](#) by trying to get religious people to take their focus off what is external:

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 of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.

Outward Judaism doesn't do much good. And neither is there much value in Christianity that is only skin-deep. You cannot impress God with your pedigree. Or with your rituals. Or with your own self-effort. The key is to focus on relationship. God is always more interested in what's on the inside than He is on the outside.

Notice the four contrasts in these two verses:

Outward vs. Inward

Physical vs. Heart

Written Code vs. The Spirit

Men vs. God

The person who is only religious will focus on external things so that others will praise him. The true believer is one who has an inner relationship with Christ, resulting in praise from God.

Are you just going through the motions? It's time to make sure you are really in a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Here's the bottom line. As shocking as it may sound, there will be many church members in hell. Many Baptists will end up in hell, as will many Catholics, many Jews, many Presbyterians, many Lutherans, and many Methodists. In fact hell will be populated with people from every religious persuasion. Why? Because many people are locked into a false religious confidence. They trusted in religion instead of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me give you five simple words that can take you all the way from earth to heaven. Here they are: Only Jesus and Jesus only.