

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Spirituality That Is Real

by Dan Trygg

“For he is not a Jew (or a Christian) who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision (or baptism) 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

In the first chapter (vss. 18-32), Paul dealt with people who were suppressing what they knew about God, and what was right, in order to pursue what was pleasurable. They didn't want to face the witness of the creation around them, or even the testimony of their own consciences, that God did, indeed, exist. **Instead, they repeatedly chose to disregard the awareness they had of God, so that they could give themselves over to sensual pursuits.** When they did this, they began to dull their consciences and blind their spiritual sensitivity, and they became foolish. Their opinions about life became more and more misguided and poorly conceived. **Those who continued down the course of deception and degradation came to the place where they got everything turned around. The good was distasteful to them, and they wanted what was evil.**

In the first part of the second chapter (vss. 1-16), Paul confronted people who were *quick to judge* those who were obviously given to sensual pleasure. These people probably thought of themselves as morally superior to those described in chapter one. They did not hesitate to point out the faults of others, thinking that, since their behavior was not as visibly extreme, they must be “pretty good people”. Paul quickly popped their bubble of self-righteousness by pointing out that **they were doing the same things in other areas. They were also guilty of suppressing the truth that they knew.** Wherever they were not living up to what they knew was true and right, they too were being disobedient to God. By judging others, they were actually condemning themselves, since they were doing the same kind of things. God would judge them by what they *did*, not just what they *knew*. Their background, education or heritage made no difference. God will not play favorites.

In the last half of Romans 2 (vss. 17-25), Paul comes right out and confronts the Jews in his audience. (We could, however, substitute the word “Christian” wherever the word “Jew” occurs, to get the same impact for our situation today.) To the Jew of that day, there were only two kinds of people: Jews and Gentiles. (We could substitute “Christian” and “non-Christian”.) Whereas the people in the first part of the chapter thought of themselves as *morally superior* to the people in chapter 1, **those Paul confronts in this latter part of chapter 2 thought of themselves as *religiously or spiritually superior*.** I mean, after all, they were Jews (Christians), ...*God's* people. They were proud of the fact that they possessed the Law (Bible), and relied on that to set them apart from other people. They boasted in God, and thought they knew His will. Certainly, *they* knew what was right and important to God, for *they* studied the scriptures regularly. **They saw themselves as guides to those who were spiritually blind, a light to those who are in spiritual darkness.** They thought they knew how to correct the foolish, and teach the immature, since in the scriptures they supposed they had the full expression of knowledge and the truth.

Up until now, Paul had caused the reader to relax by constructing one long sentence, from verse 17 through the end of 20. Now, he begins his confrontation with a burst of brief, staccato-like questions. “You, the one teaching others, do you not teach *yourself*? You, the one preaching not to steal, do *you* steal? The one saying to not commit adultery, do *you* commit adultery? The one detesting idols, do *you* rob temples? You who boast in Law (or, the Bible), by means of the overstepping of the Law, do *you* dishonor God?” **These are all rhetorical questions, meaning that they are stated in such a way that an affirmative answer is expected.** “Yes, I don't teach myself.” “Yes, I steal.” “Yes, I commit adultery.” “Yes, I rob temples.” “Yes, I dishonor God.” **As a final blow, Paul quotes from the OT, for “the name of God is blasphemed among the nations because of you” (Isa. 52:5 LXX).** Of course, the apostle is just writing a blanket letter, so his statements are merely general. It is not his intent to offer any evidence to support his statements. His point is that **religious associations, memberships, trappings and practices mean *nothing* if there is hypocrisy in the way a person lives.** Even though the person may consider him or herself to be superior, based upon a religious identity or association, the religious veneer is often quite thin. **People who claim to be godly, but continue in sin, will cause far greater damage to the cause of Christ than those who are sensually-minded pagans.**

Paul mentions that **religious practices are of no value, if one's heart and life are not consistent with his or her faith claims.** Circumcision was one of the practices that distinguished Judaism from the non-Jewish world. To be circumcised meant that you were identified with the covenant God established with Abraham. **If your behavior is not consistent with what you *know* God requires, however, then, in practice, you are breaking the covenant that you**

were supposedly identified with. A non-circumcised Gentile, who lived a moral and upright life, one that was in agreement with the requirements of the Law, would be more acceptable to God than a circumcised person who willfully chose to live in violation of the Law at other points. The circumcision of the Jewish man would mean virtually nothing, if the rest of his life was inconsistent with, or in rebellion to, the Law. By contrast, God would accept the Gentile as though he was circumcised, if his lifestyle was God-honoring and righteous. Paul goes so far as to say that his uncircumcision would be regarded as circumcision, while the circumcision of the unrighteous Jewish fellow would be accounted as nothing. (Similarly, if someone were to simply profess to believe in Jesus and get baptized, ...or was baptized as an infant..., his baptism will not be accounted for anything, if his life is inconsistent with his “faith-claims”).

The core of Paul’s argument is stated clearly in vss. 28 and 29, “For he is not a Jew who is one *outwardly*; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one *inwardly*; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not the letter, and his praise is not from men, but from God.” Proverbs 4:23 states that **from the heart flow the springs of life.** What this means is that the outworking of one’s heart is seen in his or her behavior. **The behavior is “downstream”, as it were, from the heart,** which is the source of one’s life. If the behavior is bad or evil, then there must be something wrong in the heart. If the heart is good, then the outward behavior will be good. **Religious behavior will never change the heart.** It is as impossible as if you were to try to correct a brackish-flavored spring by putting a chemical in the water downstream. **What is “downstream” will not change what is “upstream”. Only a radical change in the depths of the spring will change the outcome.** People may sometimes go to church with the thought that they are putting in their time, doing their duty toward God, etc. They may believe that God exists, and they want to be on His good side. If, however, they think that God will be fooled by a “skin deep” kind of faith-walk, Paul is here to say that God is not impressed. He wants something that is not just pretense. In fact, **God hates pretense and phoniness** (Isa. 1:12-17; Amos 5:21-24; Matt. 23:1-36). **He wants truth in the inward parts** (Psa. 51:6) **and one who walks with integrity, ...one who expresses heart-righteousness through outward actions** (Psa. 15:2). It is a mockery to claim to be a follower of God and continue to live a life of willful sin, or to disregard other people (1 Jn. 3:15-18).

A life of hypocrisy is also another form of suppressing the truth, the very charge which Paul had levied against the two other previous groups. In the case of religious people, however, **not only do they suppress the truth of what they are doing from their own selves,** justifying and rationalizing in the face of what their own minds and consciences tell them, ...enough so as to think they can get away with the particular sin, or that it is harmless, or that other people are doing it..., **but they also attempt to hide the truth about their own lives from others. They become play actors, people who pretend to be something they are not.** The NT Greek word is transliterated into English as “hypocrite”. **This is exactly the opposite of what God is looking for from us, His children.** He wants truth in the inward parts, and He desires that those who worship Him would worship in Spirit and in truth (Jn. 4:23,24).

Notice the last part of Romans 2:29, “...and his praise is not from men, but from God.” **The hypocrite is looking for praise from men.** That is why he or she pretends. That is why he or she hides behind a mask, a façade. **He or she is more concerned about what others think and see, than what God sees.** It is quite clear that such a person does not really believe in God, because God is omniscient. He knows everything. If we really believed that, then would it make any sense to pretend? **The fact that people choose to pretend indicates that they don’t really believe that God knows, or cares, ...or they don’t really believe in God, at all.** Oh, they may tell themselves, “I believe”, but *their actions belie their words.*

God is looking for true, honest worshipers (Jn. 4:23,24). We often say that Christianity is not a religion; it is a relationship. This is one example of that truth. **In a religion, the actions of the worshiper are supposed to appease or satisfy the god whom the worshiper serves. Oftentimes, it is the outward behavior which is the focus.** There are sacrifices and duties to be performed in order to draw near. It is thought that the outward service would either change the inner heart, or would win favor with the god, or both. **The Christian message is all about what God has done!** Because of His great love for us, **God has already taken the step to remove any barriers between us and Him.** He Himself put forward the payment to appease wrath and satisfy justice. **He invites us into a reconciled relationship with Him. God is concerned first and foremost with the heart.** The new covenant is a heart-covenant. It is *inward*. It is crucial that we not be duplicitous or double-minded. **The heart that has been drawn to God through His love and grace opens to Him, like a flower toward the sun.** There can be no secrets in such a place. Such an open heart has been captured by the unconditional nature of His calling and acceptance. **A heart that has been truly and deeply touched by love and grace, ...one that really understands and believes that this grace is real..., cannot help but respond** to such a love. Whatever could be done to please the Lover, ...whatever could be done to come closer, to hear more clearly the whispers of His lips..., would be readily performed, ...out of *eagerness* and *love*, not duty, ...not to *gain acceptance*, but to *go deeper into the acceptance* which has *already* been made available in Christ.