

## **Ritual and Reality**

### ***Romans 2:25 - 29***

*<sup>25</sup>Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. <sup>26</sup>If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? <sup>27</sup>The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker. <sup>28</sup>A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. <sup>29</sup>No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God.*

**Traditions and customs can be good and enjoyable. But when they become rituals and take the place of God and what He is doing, then they lose their value and become stumbling blocks. Traditions and rituals should always reflect spiritual truth and God's wisdom. Much of what we deem essential could in fact be empty traditions or rituals where God cannot be found.**

**Paul dealt with some readers who insisted upon keeping rituals and customs at the expense of Christ. In verse 25, Paul gave the example of circumcision. Physical circumcision brought no life or righteousness to the recipient. Some in Paul's day had a tendency to substitute rituals for faith and the work of Christ on the cross.**

**We often fall into the same trap. Our tendency may not be circumcision, but nonetheless, we can embrace rituals and traditions at the expense of Christ and faith. Often we can elevate busyness, "the way we have always done things," opinions of others, personal preferences and styles to idolatrous levels.**

**David Jeremiah has written, "Whatever else we may have learned from the second chapter of Romans, we must not lose sight of the main message. Paul is reminding all of his Roman readers that a religion without reality will not be acceptable to God. Religious heritage does not matter. Religious claims do not matter. Religious associations do not matter. Rituals are not sufficient to commend one to God."**

**Often we can get caught up with outward appearances while neglecting the inside. But God's more passionate about inward realities and inward transformation than the outside. Consider the example of David's selection as king. When Samuel considered all of Jesse's sons, he saw young men he**

believed “looked like” king-material. But God cautioned Samuel not to consider the outside. For God looks at the heart and the inside more than the outward appearance (see I Samuel 16:1-13).

Christians should never reduce their faith to a laundry list of rituals, habits and traditions. The essence of faith is falling in love with Christ and growing in love for Him throughout one’s life. It was Jesus who gave us the priority commands to love God above all else and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Theologian Charles Hodge once 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.”* A focus on externals and traditions can be a good indication that one’s relationship with God is stressed or strained. When we are wandering away from God, we have a tendency to embrace any number of substitutes.

#### Applications . . .

1. Consider your own life. What habits or traditions do you have an inclination or tendency to elevate above Christ?
2. Confess to God any customs or rituals that you have valued above Him.
3. Identify a situation or two in your life where you have made poor judgments simply based upon outward appearances or external things. What were the results?
4. Identify some healthy traditions or customs that complement true faith in Christ. Why are these examples good?

*“The first chapters of Romans are not exactly upbeat.  
Paul gives us the bad news before he gives the good news.  
He will eventually tell us we are all equal candidates for grace  
but not before he proves that we are all desperately sinful.*

*We have to see the mess we are in  
before we can appreciate the God we have.”*

Max Lucado, *In The Grip of Grace*