

CUT FROM THE HEART, ROM.2:17-29

Pax Romana #4

◆**Intro:** It was many moons ago. It took place on the great and open plains of Iowa, where once many herds had roamed. I was but a young brave... (or a brave young... pastor), serving my first church in that territory. And now I must tell you a tale you may not believe, for it was then that I met a spirit. The spirit had spoken among this clan for many years, and now it was speaking to me through some of their chiefs! Their tribe had a book as well, with many pages showing the proper way to appease the spirit. I read their book. Here are some of the things it said.

◆Congregational members are not to join into groups to lift their voices in songs during the sacred worship ritual. If such choirs absolutely had to exist, they would be allowed to make music before or after church was officially going on, that is, before the vatum and salutation, or after the benediction.

◆No one was to mount the steps in the temple (worship center) and stand on the holy ground which resides directly behind the pulpit except the man ordained for that task. Normal announcements must be made from the floor level.

◆Adoptive children will not be baptized.

◆Guitars are not mentioned in ancient texts and therefore not permissible in a worship service. However players of the zither, harp or lyre are welcome, as these do appear in the ancient texts.

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◆ The story I have just told is a true story, of my experience in our first pastorate, where some members actually complained if we sang songs written after 1950 during official church time. I know it's a surprise, it surprised me too, but on days when we'd gather to worship that were not biblical holidays, like say, Thanksgiving, the nay-sayers were perfectly happy to engage in all manner of worship style, because after all, Thanksgiving was not in the Bible, so it didn't matter how one worshiped on Thanksgiving. One day Lawrence walked into the church foyer and reported to me that he had visited a very cool church in a neighboring town that used drums, guitars and drama. How moving it had been. Knowing Lawrence I responded, "Say Larry, whatdoya think of us doing some of that here?" His retort was totally serious: "Over my dead body!" *Many people feel good about doing or knowing what they consider the right thing. But this is not what God wants for your life.*

◆ The Jewish people were not well-liked by other nations. Though God called them in the OT to be a "light to the nations" over time they came to despise the nations. To a Jew, there were two kinds of people in the world: Jews, and everybody else (the ethne, or nations, or gentiles). That would be like saying in all of the globe there are only Hoosiers, and everybody who's not. That would mean you're not a Packer fan, you're a "not" or "other". You're not a African American, you're an "other". You're not of Italian descent. You're just "other". It's Hoosier, or Other.

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Nothing else. Jews came to believe and teach that because they were the chosen people of the one true God (and they were!) that they had nothing to worry about. They were safe for the day of Judgment. That base is covered. There isn't anything left. They have peace with God on account of two major advantages 1) they know the true doctrine (law of Moses) and 2) they practice the true rituals (circumcision). Lets start with the first one.

◆ **1. Law:** You will notice that v17-24 are addressed specifically to the Jewish church members of Rome, and are all about Law (17, 18, 20, 23) To be sure, receiving commands out of heaven on a mountain, written by the finger of God on stone, to be shared with the rest of mankind, is nothing to make light of! (Exodus 19-20) However, the law without the living of it, is a problem. Or, **Profession without performance is a problem.** Another way to put it, knowing the right thing doesn't get me close to God or salvation, without doing the right thing.

◆ **A.** Don't miss this: possessing truth is not the same as obeying truth. What if I asked "How many in the room believe that the Bible says that God wants, no commands you, to save all sexual thought and activity for marriage alone?" I presume perhaps a great many would raise their hands. Then what if I asked, "How many in the room are in fact reserving all sexual thought and activity for their marriage alone?" Perhaps there would be a different number of hands up. Now this is going to sound painful

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but... if you are one of those folks who, in any way at all, have not followed God's pattern for pure marriage, you have disqualified yourself from God's favor. We have become "not good enough" for blessing. Not good enough to expect answers to our prayers. This is what Paul asks in verse 22.

◆"you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?" Romans 2:21, 22, NIV.

◆It's like lecturing your kids on the perils of smoking tobacco, while you light up a cigarette. Sure it's good information. But it's hypocrisy! You have become disqualified on the topic. Knowing the answer is not the same as living the answer. That's just bad thinking.

◆[Like the three old men at the doctor for a memory test. The doctor said to the first old man, "What is one plus one?" "Two hundred seventy-four," he replied. The doctor said to the second man, "It's your turn. What is one plus one?" "Tuesday," replied the second man. The doctor said to the third man, "Okay, your turn. What's one plus one?" "Two," said the third man. "That's great!" said the doctor. "How did you get that?" "Simple," said the third man. "I subtracted 274 from Tuesday." It's just bad thinking! Knowing the answer isn't necessarily a sign of good health!]

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◆ You don't please God or invite his power in your life, by knowing the answers, having bible knowledge, or theological expertise. This is not what delights God. It's doing the right thing, every time that delights God, being righteous yourself. God loves it when you do the right thing! But then, talk about pressure!!

◆ *"This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the LORD. Jer 9:23-24*

◆ Now in our text (17) the Jews were "boasting in God" just like Jeremiah says. "We got the truth. We know about God. We're more right than the rest of you. We've got the history: you know, Abe, Jacob, Moses, Joseph, David, Elijah." But wait. Is that what God meant? What does God want them to know according to Jeremiah? Him! What is he like? He exercises kindness. He lives justly. He *is* righteous in all he does. He delights in *being* this way. Earlier in Jeremiah's chapter God complains "they have forsaken my law, which I set before them; they have not obeyed me or followed my law." Jeremiah 9:13, NIV. It's not what you know, it's what you do!

◆ Again, the question of Paul's letter to the Romans: How you doing at doing righteousness every time?

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◆**B.** Now do contemporary Christian people make this kind of mistake that the Jewish converts in Rome made? Well, have you ever felt superior because you were Conservative Christian, vs some liberal one? Or because you were Reformed in theology and therefore closer to God than the erring Arminian children of God? Do you think less of Christians in other denominations because they don't know the doctrines you know. (Not that doctrine isn't important.) But do you expect the Lord to bless you for being more correct than the Christians down the street who are hung up on church on Saturday? Do you think lowly of God-followers who are also democrats (if you're republican), or who don't have the gift of tongues? Are you angry with God for not stopping more difficulties in your life (sickness, accidents, losses) because, after all, you've been a pretty good person, and well, what for? See, No one can play the "pretty good" card. When it comes to law & goodness it's all or nothing. That makes profession without performance a problem. Do you see why a "righteousness from God" is the good news of the Gospel? Paul is slowly pulling back the layers so we see ourselves as we really are, and so in utter, thankful amazement we beam at the face of Christ and sigh in delighted relief!

◆**C.** There's also another problem with profession without performance: it's a turn off. It makes God look bad.

◆v24 "As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."" Romans 2:24, NIV.

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- ◆ It's interesting how in human nature we jump to conclusions about whole groups of people based purely on one or two. But we do. Jewish historian Josephus records that in AD19 four Jews of Rome, led by one professing to teach the Jewish faith to interested Gentiles, persuaded a noble Roman lady to convert and make a large contribution to the temple in Jerusalem, but they kept the funds for themselves. When this came to light it was such a scandal in Rome that Emperor Tiberius actually expelled all resident Jews from the city of Rome. This gave the name "Jew" great disrepute.
- ◆ Like it or not, you represent the God you follow, and so your behavior has impact on what other people think of your faith. That makes talk without walk a wasted witness. The best way for you to make Jesus look irrelevant is to say you believe in him, and then live just like everyone else who doesn't. And what your friends at work need is not mere information about God; what they need is to fall in love with God (what Paul calls in v29 "circumcision of the heart"). You may be the only example of Christ they meet, so how you conduct yourself with them is of great power.
- ◆ **2.** The second topic Paul addresses in our text is religion and ritual. **Ritual without reality is a problem.** Religiosity doesn't get me close to God or salvation. Paul's example of being religious is the ritual of circumcision. This practice went all the

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way back to Abraham in Genesis 17 and is the topic of verses 25-29.

◆ Some official Jewish teachings held that the circumcised Jew would be safe on the day of Judgment. But that's just not so, according to the Old Testament.

◆ *"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh-- Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon, Moab and all who live in the desert in distant places. For all these nations are really uncircumcised, and even the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart."* Jeremiah 9:23-26, NIV.

◆ Interesting that Jeremiah speaks about both of Paul's topics in the same place: law, and circumcision. Israel's neighbors also practiced circumcision, but not as a symbol of belonging to Israel's God. Ritual without reality is nothing, not even for a Jew. Know why ritual without reality is a problem? God cares about the reality in your heart. He doesn't care about your ritual. Those are only meant to help your heart think!

◆ And yet the modern church member thinks that she and God are close based on the adequate percentage of time she shows up at church, or whether she was baptized by the right denomination, or because she cried when she prayed that one time, or she heard a word from the lord at a retreat. (In the OT, God spoke through a donkey too. That doesn't make them Christians.)

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◆**B.** How can I tell if I'm a religious person without the reality?

Let me suggest a few questions for us to ask.

- ◆When you read the Bible does your mind first go to what it's saying to or about you? Or do you more easily think of someone else who really needs to hear this?
 - ◆Do you bow your head in prayer when you are alone and no one is looking? Do you look around after you bow in public?
 - ◆Can you think of a lot of things the speaker should have said?
 - ◆Is it strangely satisfying to tell about another person's fault, or mistake or scandal (gossip)?
 - ◆Do people keep away from you and avoid sharing their troubles or faults with you?
 - ◆When someone points out some error of yours do you change the topic, or get defensive?
 - ◆Do you have long lists of things you want other people to change?
 - ◆Are you smug? Are you oversensitive? Are you judgmental?
 - ◆Are you frequently anxious about how people see you?
 - ◆Do people want to be around you?
- ◆These I think aim at the reality on our insides vs our ritual on the outside, and the inner person is God's concern here, right? ("No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision

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of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God." Romans 2:29, NIV.)

◆ **Conclusion:** More than anything, what we all need is a heart that loves God. However, not only can we not perform our way into the graces of the Sovereign God through laws or rituals, but we can't fully love him on our power either. We need his love to come after us; a righteousness from God, through Christ.

◆ *The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live." Deuteronomy 30:6, NIV.*

◆ Let me return to my tale of the Northwest plains of Iowa. I'm almost sorry to tell you this, but in the 1990's Christian Reformed church members had a nickname in Northwest IA: Toasties. If you were a member of a CRC church such as we are, you were a Toastie to everyone from any other church. You see, there had been a day when Post cereal company had a commercial about their Toasties cornflakes that said, "A little bit better than the rest." And that was exactly what a whole generation of church people had acted like among the farmlands of Northwest IA.

◆ Are you beginning to feel a need for righteousness? To somehow actually become a good person? This is a very difficult things to desire. Here's what one looks like: The *righteous* person tries to see his own faults, and to overlook the faults of others. He is also eager to recognize the good things in others,

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and disregard the good things of their own. On the other hand, the *unrighteous* person looks for the good in *himself*, and notices the *evil* in others. (Luther, p.52) He is glad when others get in trouble for their evil. He is glad when he gets credit for his own good. Now this we seem to do quite well, wouldn't you say? But not one of us can conjure up real righteousness. Jesus can give it to you. Accept the Pax Romana, the gospel of righteousness from God.

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◆ Notes on Circumcision and Communion:

◆ Nobody wants to find out on Judgement Day that they were all along dead spiritually. Orthodox in information, but not belonging to God in their heart. But this belonging is a gift of God's holy Spirit. It is not something we can merit by following the written rules. ("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." Romans 2:29, NIV.)

◆ The hope we have is that the Spirit has given us circumcision of the heart through Jesus. You see, in ancient times you didn't sign your name to bind a deal. You made a sign: you acted out the curse you would accept if you didn't keep your bargain. So, you might put dirt on your head and say, "If I renege, may I go down to the dirt." Or you might cut a cow in half and say, "If I don't keep my promise, may I be cut in half like this cow." (God did that in Gen.15 with Abraham.) Even so, circumcision had a multilayered meaning. Not only was our source of life and reproduction marked as belonging to God, but also God was making a self-maledictory oath: "may I be cut off from life if I do not keep my covenant with you." In other words "I will keep my promise to be your God even if it kills me." And that friends is exactly what happened. In Colossians, Paul says to Gentile Christians who have never had the ritual of circumcision,

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- ◆“and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the Head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.” Colossians 2:10-14, NIV.
- ◆The mark also represented the person’s acceptance of the relationship. God promises to give us life, and we promise to seek it from him alone. Yet none of us can keep the promise because of our sin. Because of Jesus’ life and death and resurrection, because Jesus was in fact, cut off from the Father and from the “land of the living” (Is.53:8) for us, he was bearing the curse so we would not. Our religious performance isn’t saving us, and our lack of performance isn’t condemning us because Jesus took our place.