

Sonoraville Baptist Church
Sunday, January 29, 2012 – 6:00 PM
Rev. Steve Skates, Pastor

Romans Series

Give Me that Old-Time Religion...Really? - Romans 2:17-29

Introduction: One of the phrases and sentiments I hear from a lot of people is “*Gimme that old time religion.*” In fact, there’s a song with that title in a hymnbook. Now I think I know what people are talking about when they express that sentiment. I think they are referring to a time when a person’s Christianity was heart-felt and genuinely expressed in worship services in sometimes creatively physical and loud ways. Of course I’m referring to the practice of jumping pews, shouting, and cadence preaching, among others. And having been in some dry and rather problematic churches, I can certainly understand why people would long to return to a more spiritually uplifting worship experience. Perhaps a more appropriate way to express that desire would be “*Give me that old-time feeling!*” rather than “*that old-time religion.*”

I say that because I believe one of the chief causes of many of the problems in the world is religion. For example, the problems in the Middle East between are over religion. The terrorist movement is based in a facet of the Muslim religion. And even in our own Baptist Convention, religion is still a threat to divide the membership and hinder the good ministries that are doing a tremendous work both nationally and internationally.

The fact is, lots of folks are turned off to God because of religion. Many people will not consider the claims of Christ because of religion. Religion is indeed a problem.

The problem is not simply hypocrisy, although that certainly is a reality. The problem is not even the evil things people do in the name of religion. These are but symptoms of the problem. You see, the problem of religion is religion itself. Religion is what encourages people to live as hypocrites. Religion is what causes people to do some of these evil acts. It's easy to be religious. But religion is not enough.

One of the things Paul has been dealing with in the book of Romans is people who reject God. Now he turns his attention to religious people. These are not people who reject God. On the contrary, these are people who affirm God, accept God's word, identify with God, and participate in the life of the church. However, they are lost. They are religious, but lost!

This is the very situation that exists in much of the world today. In fact, in many Bible-believing, evangelical, Christian churches you'll find many people who are religious, but lost. People may be religious, and do things religiously, but you must understand that religion will never get a person into Heaven. Religion is not enough – It never was, and it never will be.

In our text, Paul exposes the false belief of trusting in religion. He is speaking to the Jews, who were the primary beneficiaries of the true word of God. God had revealed Himself to the Jews. They were His people. But we can make the application that the Jews represent anyone who trusts in religion today. By understanding the mistakes the Jews made, I hope we can see if we're making those same mistakes. The real question is this: “*Are you trusting in religion or in Christ?*”

1. Religion (17-20)

Why is religion an enemy of Christianity when the Bible speaks about “*pure and undefiled religion*” in the book of James (1:27)? Well, the reason why it’s called “*pure and undefiled religion*” in the Bible is because of the danger of “*impure or false religion.*” And I am willing to go so far as to say that almost all of what passes for religion in our day is false religion. “*Pure and undefiled religion*” or “*true religion*” is really a relationship with the living God. Religion has been defined by some as man's attempt to be pleasing to God. On the other hand, the Bible teaches that we can never make ourselves pleasing to God by our own efforts. Therefore, the problem is when religion becomes one’s own effort to earn his or her salvation.

Religion produces people who trust in themselves and their identity as religious people. This was the case of the Jews to whom Paul wrote in vs. 17-20: **17** *Now if you call yourself a Jew, and rest in the law, and boast in God, 18 and know His will, and approve the things that are superior, being instructed from the law, 19 and are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light to those in darkness, 20 an instructor of the ignorant, a*

teacher of the immature, having in the law the full expression of knowledge and truth— **Romans 2:17-20 (HCSB)**

Apparently, these people were proud of being religious. Paul says that “*you call yourself a Jew.*” They were proud of that name. It identified them as the people upon whom God had shown favor. It also indicated that they were a very religious people. Paul could have said, “*You take pride in being known as a religious people.*” This is how we should apply this today.

This is the subtle deception of religion. Religion leads to a prideful attitude. That is always the case. It was for the Jews. Notice what they took pride in. They were proud that they had the law. They were happy that as Jews they were known to “*rest in the law.*” Of course, the reason they could do this was because they had been given the law of God by God Himself. They had His law written down. This caused them to brag about their relationship to God. They were pleased with themselves to know God’s will. They were instructed by the law. And they considered themselves “*a guide for the blind, a light to those in darkness, an instructor of the ignorant, a teacher of the immature...*” They were proud to be religious. They had the truth, knew the truth, agreed with the truth, and they taught the truth.

Yet, this pride led them to presume something that was not true. Because of who they thought they were, they thought they were pleasing to God. They presumed that their religion was enough. But they were wrong. It is not enough to consider yourself religious. It is not enough to rest in the law. It is not enough to brag about your relationship to God. It is not enough to know God’s will and even approve of what is right. It is not enough to be instructed by the law. It is not even enough to be a teacher of the truth. These things are not enough.

Listen to the problem and predicament they were in: **21** *you then, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach, “You must not steal”—do you steal? 22* *You who say, “You must not commit adultery”—do you commit adultery? You who detest idols, do you rob their temples? 23* *You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? 24* *For, as it is written: The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.* **Romans 2:21-24 (HCSB)**

These folks had become hypocrites. They thought they were following God when in fact they were dishonoring God by breaking His law. They taught one thing and did another. They were religious. But they had missed the point altogether. It is not so much what you know, agree with, or teach. It is who you are in Christ. Following God is not about the head, it is about the heart.

2. Ritual (25-27)

25 *The Jewish ceremony of circumcision is worth something only if you obey God's law. But if you don't obey God's law, you are no better off than an uncircumcised Gentile. 26* *And if the Gentiles obey God's law, won't God give them all the rights and honors of being his own people? 27* *In fact, uncircumcised Gentiles who keep God's law will be much better off than you Jews who are circumcised and know so much about God's law but don't obey it.* **Romans 2:25-27 (NLT)**

One of the traps of religion is the idea that somehow, if we participate in religious ritual, we’ll gain God’s approval. For Jews, the big ritual was circumcision. This was the sign of the covenant that God had made with Israel. Every Jewish male child would be circumcised on the eighth day of his life as a sign to the covenant God had made with His chosen people. So for Paul to talk to them about the ritual of circumcision was to talk about their identification as the people of God.

The problem was that the Jews had come to rely upon this religious ritual instead of seeing the spiritual significance behind it. But Paul is saying is that the ritual only has value if you observe the law. If you just go through the ritual with no inner spiritual significance attached to it, you might as well be watching paint dry! You’re wasting your time and effort! If they were not willing to do what God had commanded, why should they think God would accept them based upon some religious ritual. Sure, God told them to do it, but the significance was not in the ritual, it was in the relationship. They were identifying with the covenant yet violating it by the way they lived their lives.

Indeed, it went even deeper than that. The Jews’ behavior was a reflection of their character. They didn’t obey the law because they didn’t want to obey the law. They wanted the benefits without the obligations of obeying God. Paul reminds them that “*if you don't obey God's law, you are no better off than an uncircumcised Gentile.*” In other words, outward rituals must testify of an inward reality.

Paul asks a rhetorical question in verse **26**: “*And if the Gentiles obey God's law, won't God give them all the*

rights and honors of being his own people?" His obvious answer is yes! Again, the emphasis is on the inward spiritual reality, not on the outward physical ritual. Indeed, these Gentiles who keep God's law will be better off than the Jewish people who break God's law.

3. Reality (28-29)

Now we come to the real heart of the issue. This is the point Paul is trying to make: *28 For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, and [true] circumcision is not something visible in the flesh. 29 On the contrary, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart—by the Spirit, not the letter. His praise is not from men but from God. Romans 2:28-29 (HCSB)*

The point is that religion is not enough. Outward ritual is not enough. You could paraphrase Paul this way: *"You are not a true believer if outwardly, you only look or act like one. Nor is true Christianity merely an outward and physical expression. You are only a true Christian if you are one on the inside; and none of your religious observance means anything unless it is from the heart, by the Spirit, and not just by knowing the letter of the law."*

The real issue, you see, is one of the heart. You can be as religious a person as you possibly can be. You could even be a preacher who knows and believes the Bible, one who knows how to read it in Hebrew and Greek, or one who proclaims it loudly and with a certain cadence from the pulpit. But if your heart is not right, it means nothing. It is a matter of the heart.

Now Paul is not saying that we shouldn't identify with the people of God, or that we should not be baptized as believers, or that we should not believe and proclaim the truth. All these things have meaning if our heart is right with God. This is the real issue. This is reality. Religion shields us from reality. God brings us face to face with reality and calls us to repent. He calls us to repent of trying to do things on our own and with a stony, cold heart. And when we do, He replaces the heart of stone with a heart of love. When that happens we'll stop trusting in the outward observance even though we participate in it. But we do not participate in it as merely a ritual, but because it testifies of a spiritual reality. A person whose *"praise is not from men, but from God."* (29).

Conclusion: If that old time religion that was good enough for your momma and daddy, and grandpa and grandma, or if it was something that they did to try to please God on their own, then it wasn't good enough then and it's not good enough now. I don't want that old time religion if it is just an empty ritual. Instead give me a real relationship with Jesus Christ that's fresh and new every day. Give me a daily walk with Him, and a daily talk with Him. Give me a heart of love for my Lord and Savior that is not based on what I can do, but is based on what He's already done. Give me a heart for Jesus, because religion is not enough!