

Romans (2:25-29)

Circumcision of the Heart

PART 8 - AUGUST 8, 2004

SEALING THE DEAL

Paul is speaking to his toughest crowd: The Religious (those people who put their faith in rites and rituals). He's just finished (2:17-24) admonishing them for:

- 1) Relying on an abundance of rules
- 2) Boasting about their religiosity
- 3) Condescending to the common-folk
- 4) Disobeying their own regulations
- 5) Disgracing God by their behavior

And He's only half done! Today, he takes aim at a sacred practice that, for the Jew, was *the* ritual of all rituals; the very sign and seal of God's covenant of grace; the physical symbol of Israel's commitment to God; the confirmation of Jehovah's promises to Abraham.

[God said to Abraham] You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised ... - Genesis 17:11 NIV

Roman Catholics and Anglicans observe *The Feast of Circumcision* on New Year's Day, because that's eight days after Christmas.

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus ... - Luke 2:21 NIV

I hope you all know what circumcision is ... 'cause there ain't gonna be a power-point presentation on this one!

I remember exactly where I was when I learned what it meant. Mrs. Ellis' 8th grade history class; she was teaching about Nazi Germany and ways they identified the Jews. I asked what circumcision was. Mrs. Ellis said, "Bruce, stop trying to make the class laugh." Did I mention everyone was laughing? I told her I really didn't know - but she was too embarrassed to explain in front of the class. So, she asked if someone could whisper it to me. This girl sitting across from got up and came over. And I can still remember saying, "They do what to the what?!" I looked at Mrs. Ellis and she just nodded. I looked around ... my entire class just nodded.

Abraham was 99 when God directed this; so, he and his 13-year-old son Ishmael underwent the procedure together (*Gen. 17:24-26*).

- There's a father-and-son bonding experience!

Q: But, if this was God's covenant with *all* the Hebrews, why do you suppose he choose something that only involved males?

A: The men were required to be the teachers of God's covenant (and His laws) in the home, so they carried the mark.

Q: And, why do you suppose he chose that particular part?

I can picture Abraham saying, "Lord, how 'bout this? I pierce my ear ... or, I notch my forehead ... or ... I could cut off a finger!"

A: This was to be a mark of intimacy, purity, and faithfulness. And, in ancient days it offered hygienic benefits as well.

But it was also practical (I can't see my own ear). A few times *every* day, no matter how hectic the life or busy the schedule, nature forces us to take a private moment ... and ponder.

- Nature itself caused them to contemplate the covenant.
- And as they grew older, they were reminded more often!

CUTTING REMARKS

Okay, so here's the problem, by Paul's day the ritual had become mechanical - an end in itself - an automatic passport to heaven. Rather than symbolizing authentic faithfulness, most men now saw this superficial symbol as a free pass to *be* unfaithful.

Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? 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. - Romans 2:25-27 NIV

To the Jews, the word "uncircumcised" was synonymous with wickedness and Godlessness. How outrageous for Paul to suggest those *devoid* of the ritual could condemn those *devoted* to it! But Paul is teaching a fundamental fact: True faith is *never* mechanical, automatic, or superficial

As Christians, circumcision (as a symbol of sanctification) has been replaced by baptism. But we can pervert that practice too; relying on the ritual to garner special status.

It doesn't matter if it's catechism, confirmation, or communion, the ceremony means nothing if it's not related to a dynamic, personal, scriptural, spiritual experience. When a religious person walks in un-repented disobedience to the Word of God, they cancel everything the rituals stand for.

- The ritual can only reflect the reality

Paul knew that the Jews no longer viewed circumcision as simply an external sign of what *must* be an inward work.

SPIR-RITUAL

Q: Remember the first thing he said when he started this section?

Now you, if you call yourself a Jew ... – Romans 2:17 NIV

He didn't say, "If you *are* a Jew." He's setting them up for his next point, a simple (scandalous) question: Who is the real Jew?

A man is not a Jew if he is only one **outwardly**, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. 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 2:28-29 NIV

Each of us is tempted to substitute the outward religious form for the inward relational reality.

- An outward practice must reflect an inward attitude

This wasn't a new concept to the Jews. The prophet Jeremiah had said the same thing to their forefathers in his O.T. oracle:

... circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem ... the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart. – Jeremiah 4:4; 9:26 NIV

And Steven, the first Christian martyr, had these final words:

"You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers ... – Acts 7:51 NIV

The Jews covered their ears and dragged Steven out of the city and stoned him. And who was there, watching and listening?

... the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul [a.k.a. Paul the apostle]. – Acts 7:57-58 NIV

Paul was holding the coats. He had no idea he would immortalize the words of this martyr, whose murder he approved of (*Acts 8:1*).

MARKING THEIR TERRITORY

Jeremiah, Steven, and Paul are all making the same point:

- The superficial mark is not what's sacred.

In the church where I grew up, the pastor could've been filled with arrogance and bitterness, but as long as the sermons were orthodox and conventional, he could've stayed on. However, if one time he would've smoked a cigarette while greeting people in the parking lot, he'd of been gone.

Q: Why is that? Nobody in my church thought that “smoking” was a bigger sin than being filled with pride or resentment.

Every group (religious or *non*) - from *Hell’s Angels* to *Girl Scouts* - has what sociologists call “identity markers.” These are superficial, highly visible, customs that serve to distinguish who is *inside* the group from who is *outside*. Think: clothing, ornamentation, vocabulary, and activities.

- When I say, “Boy Scout” you picture their *identity markers*.

Smoking was one of our boundary markers. It told us who were in and who were out. For us, smoking had taken on an inappropriate theological significance, way beyond health issues.

- *Not-smoking* became sacred.

Circumcision had become nothing more than a boundary marker ... distinguishing (for the Jew) who was inside and who was outside of their group of God’s Chosen People. But Paul is teaching what Jesus taught: It’s not about the markers, it’s about the heart.

- Is it oriented toward loving, or not loving God?
- Is it oriented toward obedience or disobedience?

That’s why Jesus could say that some of the most religious (who had all the right markers) were *outside* of the Kingdom. While some of the marker-less (like tax collectors and harlots) once they turned and oriented themselves toward God were *inside*.

- It’s the direction you face not the distance you’ve come

If we don’t allow and promote authentic transformation inside, our spiritual life will become a search for superficial, highly visible, customs to prop up our sense of inclusion.

Q: What are some of your Christian identity markers?

Most people know that Christians *should* be different (more loving and joyful than our secular culture) and most people know that that’s not always the case.

Q: So, don’t we have to do *something* to distinguish ourselves?!

If we resist the Spirit’s assistance to *make* us different, we’ll find ways to *act* different, because we know we’re supposed to *be* different. It’s like the unwritten rule of Christianity: If we can’t be holy, we should at least be weird!

Q: Who is a true Jew - a chosen heir to God’s Kingdom?

A: According to Paul: without Christ no one can be a true Jew; but with Christ, anyone can be.

If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise. – Galatians 3:29 NIV