

Lost in Religion Lesson 2  
Romans 2:17-3:31  
by Dellena Ludwig

I love the book of Romans! It is such a logical presentation of God's plan for us. Are you enjoying your study so far? Last week, in the first two chapters, we learned that the holy God has revealed Himself to sinful man through his creation so he is without excuse for believing that God exists.

But God didn't just create the world and us and then leave us alone; His desire was to have fellowship with man. We know the story of Adam and Eve and their fall to sin as they listened to the serpent's voice instead of God's voice. That viper's voice has continued to tempt and deceive throughout the ages.

But God had a plan to give His people a way back into fellowship with Him...He would call a man (Abraham) and work through him to create a nation to whom He would give His Law (The Mosaic Law) and show them what was His standard for righteousness. But like many today, they became lost in religion. The rituals and man's traditions that evolved over the years eroded the intent of the Law, which was to motivate man to holiness. Instead it became a system of rule keeping that actually widened the breach between God and man by exposing his sinfulness.

In Roman times, most of the non-Jewish people believed in many gods. They believed that there was a god who governed the harvest, the ocean, the woods, the stars, the sun and war. The only way to get any favor from these gods was to give them gifts, offerings and sacrifices. But even then, their gods might be busy doing something else or capriciously slamming people with trials.

Many Gentiles philosophically believed that if you just leave the gods alone, they would leave you alone and hopefully never notice your life and progress. But whether they religiously served them, or tried to hide from them using philosophy, they lived in fear that somehow they might offend these gods, and face their wrath with wars, pestilence and poverty. They too were lost in their religions.

The Jewish nation had a very special relationship to God. Along with the Law, He gave them promises, among which he said that if they would obey and keep the Law, He would bless them, and bless all the other nations through them. To varying degrees, the Jews tried to keep the Law. However, the hiss of the serpent became bolder and idol worship infiltrated the nation to the point that they missed the blessings through the centuries and instead reaped God's wrath that showed itself in wars, captivity and exile.

Then, the Jews who returned to the area of Judah after the exile, determined to try harder to keep the Law. They were easily proud of their efforts. They knew God was using them to show non-Jews the type of moral life He demanded. But they thought the only way these Gentiles could really know the God of the Jews was by joining them, becoming a God-fearer, or one who adopted circumcision and obedience

to the Law, like a Jew.

But God's plan to save mankind was much broader than merely conformity to the Jewish religion. God himself reached down to the earth, becoming a man known as Jesus. It was Jesus who satisfied the requirements of the Law to make a way for any who would believe in him to be saved.

The first believers were Jews. But very soon God expanded his church of believers to include Gentiles. However, some of the Jews couldn't understand how non-Jews could become part of God's family without first becoming followers of the law. This caused anger and persecution which scattered believers throughout the Roman Empire.

So in this book of Romans, Paul addressed the Jews as well as the Gentiles living in Rome. In the passage we studied this week, he took up the challenge of opening the eyes of his fellow Jews as to their need of redemption. He presented how their need for salvation was just as great as the need of the heathen. Because the Jew was also as "Lost in Religion" as the Gentile was.

Paul began in verses 17-20 of chapter two, by stating the common Jewish perspective on their superiority. "Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth -- "

Just reading down through these verses shows the superior attitude of these religious Jews. They were ready to teach the poor, ignorant Gentiles and guide them to the light! But the next few verses knocked the Jews off of their pedestals: "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? You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?" [Romans 2:21-23]

The Jews thought that they had their religion down. They could quote the Ten Commandments. They kept the religious holidays. They participated in the sacrifices and gave alms to the poor and tithes to the temple. But their everyday lives screamed that they were hypocrites.

Jesus condemned the Jew-of-all-Jews – the Pharisees - for these same inconsistencies. In the gospel of Mark, chapter 7, Jesus told them, "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions." Luke recorded how Jesus pronounced woes against the Pharisees who instructed others to do one thing, and then themselves did the opposite. Then he instructed his disciples, ..."Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy." [Luke 12:1b]

Paul emphasized this same point in Romans 2, verse 24: "As it is written: 'God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'" The Jews were proud of their tradition of being the possessors of the law. But they were not obeying the law in their daily practices. They thought that

memorizing the law, being circumcised and following the ceremonies that the law required was enough. Pride in their religion caused them to be hypocritical in their practice.

Our pride in our religion can cause non-believers to blaspheme God's name too. Our neighbors see us driving off to church each Sunday, but do they hear us arguing and bickering with our family members during the rest of the week? Do we boast of how big our church is, but ignore the needs of the un-churched around us? Can we verbalize the plot of the top-selling novel we've read, but can't quote a verse from the Bible? Or can we quote a verse from the Bible to judge someone else, but they see us breaking the moral code of the Bible in our entertainment practices?

The world can clearly see the difference between a good moral person and a religious hypocrite. The Roman world could distinguish it too. Paul described this observation in verses 26 and 27: "So then, 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 2:26,27]

But in verses 28 and 29, Paul drove home their condemnation: "A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God."

Perhaps the most common way people get lost in religion, is because we are looking for praise from people rather than from God. God has declared that he looks on the heart. But it is so much more difficult to remedy our inward thoughts and emotions than to just put on an outward show for those around us. Perhaps we are learning in this lesson, that we don't do such a good job keeping our outward form of goodness under control as we think. Are there good, moral non-church goers who are living a better life than we are?

Such a proclamation was a shock to the very religious Jews. Paul was also a Jew. In fact, he told us in Acts 23:3 "Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the Law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are." So he knew the questions that were pounding in the heads of his Jewish audience: "What advantage is there in being a Jew? What value is circumcision? What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness?..." [Romans 3:1-3] But many of us here today/tonight can ask the same thing, can't we?

When I was a little girl, I was taught not to lie, steal or be disrespectful to my parents. But, did it matter when Mom and Dad weren't around? Was I really stealing if nobody missed it, or no one found out I was the one who took it? If I showed respect to my parents on the outside, did it matter that I argued back and dishonored them on the inside, especially in my teenage years? I was trying to put on an outward form of being good, because I was taught right from wrong. But it didn't match my inside bent.

Matthew Henry restated Paul's conclusion: "No forms, ordinances, or notions can profit without regenerating grace, which will always lead to seeking an interest in the righteousness of God by faith. For he is no more a Christian now, than he was a Jew of old, who is only one outwardly."?

Sometimes we use our form of outward religion to hide our sinful attitude on the inside. Can our inability to live faithfully before God "nullify God's faithfulness?" Paul cried out, "Not at all! Let God be true, and every human be a liar." [Romans 3:3,4] The advantage of living with the knowledge of right and wrong is that we clearly can see how far away from God's perfection we stand. We compare what we should be like, with how we really behave when no one is watching and discover, as Paul said in verse 9, "... (we) are all under the power of sin." [Romans 3:9] The only advantage is that we know we have doomed ourselves by our actions.

"As it is written: There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." [Romans 3:10-12] Our best efforts to keep God's moral law just fail. No matter how much we may know the right way, we fail to keep it perfectly. Our own sinful spirits slip and choose selfish desires above the discipline of doing right.

And if our worthlessness wasn't enough, Paul describes how our entire being is involved in the following verses. "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes." [Romans 3:13-18]

Wow! Paul used quotes from the prophets in the history of Israel to illustrate that from their heads to their toes they have chosen to do wrong. To sum it up, Paul says in verses 19 and 20: "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin." [Romans 3:19,20]

What are we to do? Our best efforts to understand and obey God are so inadequate! "But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," [Romans 3:21-23]

From our memory verse, Romans 3:23 we see the dilemma. The goal of our life is to reach righteousness before God, but all of our efforts, all of our struggles to reach to that righteousness falls short. It is as if there is this huge chasm between God and us. We try to find a way across, because if we

stay here, we are doomed – forever separated from God. So, we try to be good, at least from all outward appearances. We try to keep the Ten Commandments. We try to go to church every week. We try to help others in need. We even do our homework for Bible Study at People of the Word.

But our best efforts just fall short. We can't reach God's standards. We continually fall into the sins, habits and hang-ups that plague us. We throw up our hands in defeat. We just can't be good enough to approach a perfect, holy God. And Satan is right there to accuse us.

So, instead of demanding that we just try harder, God reached down to us. Verses 24 through 26 picks up the declaration that changes the entire bleak picture of our inadequacies into a glorious vista of God's abundant grace. “and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – He did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.” [Romans 3:24-26]

We couldn't reach God. Our own righteousness – doing what is right, was just not good enough to satisfy the holiness God demanded. As God is just, He could not just pick and choose the best of us to live with him in heaven. He couldn't just wink at our sins and say, “Oh, that's not so bad. Come on up.” Justice demanded that sin be paid for in blood.

Let's review some verses from the book of Hebrews about blood sacrifice:

9:22 “In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”

9:12 “He (Jesus) did not enter (the perfect tabernacle) by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.”

10:4 “...it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”

10:10 “...we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus once for all.

Jesus took our place and shed his blood on the cross and died for us. Through that voluntary death, he satisfied the price God's holiness demanded and we were redeemed -bought out of the slavery cycle we were in. As Jesus said, “It is finished.” The debt of sin we owe has been paid in full. He made righteousness available to us through the faith that accepts Jesus' sacrifice.

Now, were all the people who lived before Jesus came to die for us, just out of luck? No. God established, before Christ, that an innocent animal, without blemish must be sacrificed for sins. He actually gave this example to Adam and Eve after they instituted sin. Genesis 3:21 says: “The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.” An animal had to be sacrificed to cover their sinfulness. Later, God gave the Law, in which he demonstrated yearly the concept of forgiveness by the shedding of blood.

In Exodus 30:10 God commanded, “Once a year Aaron shall make atonement on its [the mercy seat's] horns. This annual atonement must be made with the blood of the atoning sin offering for the generations to come. It is most holy to the Lord.” Both a bull and goat were sacrificed for the sins of the high priest himself first, and then for all the sins of the people. The high priest would sprinkle the blood of the bull on the cover on top of the Ark of the Covenant. This was called the atonement cover, and also called the Mercy Seat.

Then, the high priest would lay his hands on another goat, which was taken outside of the camp of the Israelite people, and sent off into the wilderness. All of this left sin unpunished, but it was to “cover” the sins of the people temporarily. The sacrifice was an atonement for all the wrong things the people had done that year. If you would like to read more about the Day of Atonement, read Leviticus chapter 16.

It was this most holy Day of Atonement by which God pointed to the one day in which he would fulfill atonement for all mankind. The sacrifices of animals did not satisfy God's Justice. They merely pointed to the day in which our debt would be finally paid. But the sacrifice of the perfectly sinless man, Jesus, would pay completely for all our sins, past, present and future. So, by the Old Testament sacrifices, the people had faith that God would one day completely pay for, or redeem us from our sins forever.

And it is by faith that everyone can receive that same redemption today. Back in verse 22 Paul introduced, “This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile.” And in verse 26 he repeated: “he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.” [Romans 3:26]

That was why Paul could confidently say in verse 27 that people have no cause for boasting. “Where, then is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith.” [Romans 3:27] Works encourage boasting. But when we realize that the only work involved was Christ's finished work on the cross that gives no cause for our boasting. Our only part is to accept that He made a way for us to be saved by faith.

It's important to remember that the Mosaic Law was not given by God as a means of salvation. Salvation has always been by faith in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Circumcision was the sign of faith in that Old Covenant with God. Legalism tried to make keeping the Law a requirement for salvation. But the death of Jesus instituted a New Covenant reinforcing that is faith that brings salvation because the debt of sin has been paid for.

So Paul asks, “Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcision by faith and the uncircumcision through that same faith.” [Romans

3:29,30]

Every Jew understood and accepted that God's standard of holiness, presented in the law, couldn't be kept completely. And every person alive knows that we can't be consistently good enough to earn God's acceptance. Therefore, we are helplessly dependent on God's amazing grace. Only in his mercy did He come down to die on the cross for us. Only through such an amazing gift of His sacrifice, can we hope to stand before God one day as a righteous believer.

Paul ended this chapter with one more question. If Gentiles can be saved by faith, without keeping the Mosaic Law, "Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith?..." [Romans 3:31] If no amount of keeping the law makes any difference for our salvation, do we then just go ahead after we become believers, and do whatever we want? After all, Jesus paid for all of our sins, past, present and future, didn't he? Does God even care if we live a life of sin or whether we live a life of good deeds?

This question will be answered in greater detail as we study further into the book of Romans. But Paul gave the "quick answer" here, "Not at all! Rather we uphold the law."

I guess if we were to sum up these first two lessons, we could make these points:

1. There is a God evidenced by His creation. [Romans 1:20]
2. There is a Day of Judgment coming. [Romans 2:16]
3. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. [Romans 3:23]
4. The Law made us conscious of sin. [Romans 3:20]
5. Man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. [Romans 3:28]
6. That faith that justifies us is in Jesus Christ.

I'd like to offer an illustration to close our lesson today. Let's say you committed a terrible crime. You are brought before the Judge and are found guilty. At your sentencing, the Judge condemns you to death.

But before you are taken away for execution, your advocate steps out from beside you and approaches the Judge. He says, "I will take that punishment for them." And to your complete astonishment, the Judge agrees. Your advocate is killed in your stead. You are free to go.

Now, would you go out of the court, and back to your life of crime, boasting that you beat the rap? Of course not! You realize that it was only because of the amazing gift of mercy done by your advocate that you are free at all! Then, you discover that he was the only Son of the Judge!

Wouldn't you want to go out and live a better life instead – one worthy of the One who gave his life for you? Jesus was that advocate, who died for you, and me. Our lives were bought with the price of Jesus' precious sacrifice. Let us not boast in our religion, but live each day as He would live, in thanks for His grace.