

Intro: A friend of mine told me the following story, as related in Sporting News magazine (I assume it to be true!). A few years ago, the NBA Charlotte Hornets had a professional basketball game. Something unusual happened. Prior to the game, a total stranger slipped into the lockerroom. No one said anything or even noticed as the fellow began to dress for the game. He pulled out of his bag an official Hornet outfit: a Hornet jersey, the right socks, shoes, and warm-up jacket. He put on his gear, and when he was done he looked just like the other players. He got in line and followed the team out on the playing floor for warm-ups. He did exactly what the real players did, and even drank water with the team at the bench. You know what gave him away? His game. One of the players, Mugsy Bogues, caught him, and said, "This guy doesn't belong to us!" He turned him in to security, and the imposter was thrown out.

Sometimes it's hard to tell the real thing, isn't it? We live in a world with imitation potatoes and imitation rolex watches. There are imitation diamonds and imitation chicken sandwiches. And there are imitation Christians.

What does it mean to be a "real" Christian? According to rough estimates, a couple of billion people in the world identify themselves as "Christian." But what does that mean? What is a "real" Christian, anyway? How can you tell what a "real" Christian is? To be honest, there is great confusion in this area. These are not easy questions to answer. Not because the Bible is unclear on the subject, for the Bible is very clear. The problem is that the term "Christian" has been abused and misused so much that the fog is very thick.

This morning, our aim is to allow the Spirit of God to use the scalpel of the Word of God to cut through the fog, so we will leave with an understanding of the truth. What is a "real" Christian? In Romans 2:25-29, we learn why there is confusion in answering this question. We settle for substitutes.

Proposition: According to Romans 2:25-29, there are two substitutes that keep us from understanding what it means to be a "real" Christian.

- I. Substitute #1: It's easy to settle for rituals instead of reality (25-27).
 - A. The Problem for the Jew
 1. A person enters a relationship with God through circumcision.
 2. A person maintains a relationship with God through ceremonial laws.
 - B. The Problem for us
 1. Like the Jew, we can be hung up on labels.
 2. Like the Jew, we can be hung up on legalism.
- II. Substitute #2: It's easy to settle for religion instead of a relationship (28-29).
 - A. The emphasis in religion is on externals.
 - B. The emphasis in a relationship is on the internal.

***Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

Conclusion: Ask yourself two questions...

1. Have I settled for ritual instead of reality?
2. Have I settled for religion instead of a relationship with Jesus Christ?

I. Substitute #1: It's easy to settle for rituals instead of reality (25-27).

The issue in Romans is righteousness. How is a person made right with God? We might put it this way--How does a person become a Christian? Romans 3:21-5:21 will answer the question of HOW. The point of Romans 1-3 is WHO. Who needs to be made right with God? All people do, for by nature, all people are not right with God. The heathen needs to be made right with God (1:18-32). The humanist needs to be made right with God (2:1-16). So does the Hebrew, which is Paul's emphasis in 2:17-29.

It was hard for a Jew to stomach what he was reading here in Paul's letter. Why? What was the problem for the Jew? He'd settled for a substitute. He'd settled for ritual instead of reality. What does that mean?

READ vv 25-27.

A. The Problem for the Jew

There's no question that the Jew had great privilege. He possessed tremendous resources, as we observed in vv 17-18: He had the right name, Book, God, plan, values, and training. The problem was not with the resources, but with his attitude towards the resources, "I must be Ok! I must be right with God!"

Paul knew the problem firsthand, for he had once been guilty of presuming all was well between him and God. Until Jesus dropped him to his knees on the road to Damascus.

What was the problem for the Jew Paul had in mind as he wrote? He had substituted rituals for reality. Specifically, he clung to two false notions.

1. A person enters a relationship with God through circumcision.

V 25 "For circumcision verily profiteth, if thou keep the law..." Circumcision was not a bad thing. In fact, God commanded Abraham and his descendants to be circumcised (Gen 17:10). Circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic covenant. It served as a visible indication for the Jew, that he was set apart from the world, that he part of God's covenant people. Circumcision was a God-given sign for Israel.

The problem was that eventually some (not all) Jews began to view circumcision as a "badge of proof" that all is well between God and us. It was viewed as the guarantee that, "I'm IN with God, that I'm safe and secure, that I'm right with God." There is a Jewish tradition that says that Abraham will be sitting at the gate of Gehenna to insure that no circumcised person will be allowed to enter hell. It was a common Jewish view that only circumcised children shared in the world to come (Harrison, 34). In short, the Jews divided all mankind into two classes: the circumcised and the uncircumcised, the saved and the lost.

What does Paul have to say about that? Please notice that circumcision does have value (25). It profits, if what is true? If you keep the Law. That is, circumcision can't save a person. Why not? Because we can't keep the rest of God's Law perfectly.

Circumcision can't save. Nor can any other ritual. Our sin invalidates it. To the Jew Paul says, "Your sin makes God look at you as though you'd never been circumcised."

Application: Some well-meaning people practice "infant baptism." Their theology is based on the premise that just as circumcision was the sign of the old covenant, infant baptism is the sign of the new covenant. When an infant is baptized, it brings the child into a relationship with God as part of God's covenant people? Is that true? Does a person become a Christian by observing some ritual or external act? No. A person is made right with God only by experiencing internal transformation. That occurs when we trust Christ.

The Jewish person had a second false notion.

2. A person maintains a relationship with God through ceremonial laws.

If the Jew believed that circumcision got him into a relationship with God, how did he think he could maintain that relationship? The answer was through strict observance of the Law. The Jewish people had an elaborate list of responsibilities spelled out in the Law. The problem, again, was not with the Law. God gave them the Law. The Law was good. The problem was with their attitude towards the Law. He viewed the Law as another means of "ritual" which earned him special status with God. Was that the case?

Notice Paul's remarks in vv 26-27. First, v 26, "Therefore, if the uncircumcision keep the righteousness of the law." Who are "the uncircumcision"? The Gentiles. What happens if the Gentiles keep the righteous requirements of the Law? God looks upon them as though they were circumcised!

Now v 27, "And shall not the uncircumcision...if it fulfill the law, judge thee?" What's Paul saying? This--Who is better off:

1. A person who is circumcised, but doesn't obey God's Law, OR...
2. A person who is not circumcised, but does obey God's Law?

Here's the crux. The Jew had a problem. He believed that if he had the right ritual (i.e. circumcision, ceremonial laws), he was Ok with God, regardless of how he lived. What he missed was this. A Jew who is a sinner is no better off than a Gentile who is a sinner. Both are sinners. One may be a "respectable sinner," and the other a "despicable sinner" (in the eyes of men), but both are in serious trouble. Both need Christ. A ritual (like circumcision) won't make a black heart white. A ritual won't lift the burden of sin from a person's shoulders.

That was the problem for the Jew. He had settled for ritual instead of reality. Do you know what? We're prone to settle for the same substitute.

B. The Problem for us

Let's point out a couple of ways in which we, too, settle for ritual instead of reality.

1. Like the Jew, we can be hung up on labels.

What do I mean by labels? There are those that believe that going to heaven is a matter of having the right "label," the right "tag." For the Jew, the label was circumcision. For many who call themselves "Christian," the label is their name is on

the membership roll of a particular denomination. "I'm a Baptist, so I'm going to heaven." "I'm a fundamentalist, so I'm right with God."

Don't misunderstand me. Labels are not bad. Those labels are not bad. But labels can be wrong. If I go to the counter at a bakery and order a creme-filled doughnut, and the salesperson pulls it off the rack next to the label, and I bite into it to discover not cream, but custard, I'm disappointed. Was the label bad? No. It's just that the label was misplaced. It was in front of a tray when it should NOT have been.

Some people hold the label "Christian" in front of them, but the label is misplaced. They don't know Christ. Oh, they may have the Christian "trimmings," the ritual, but they don't know Christ.

And even people who do know Christ can be hung up with labels. Remember, a label doesn't make a person right with God.

2. Like the Jew, we can be hung up on legalism.

The Jews had an enormous religious system of do's and don'ts. Unfortunately, so do many who claim the name "Christian." They assert, "To stay in tune with God, you have to abide by a set of rules. You must follow our dress code. You must carry the version of the Bible we approve." Obeying God's Word is one thing, but living by man's rules is another. The first is biblical Christianity, the latter is legalism.

Just because a religious group says, "We believe in Jesus," does not make it "real," biblical Christianity. Mormonism believes in Jesus. Even Islam believes in Jesus. Just because a person says, "I believe in Jesus," doesn't make him a Christian.

How can we discern? Two questions are in order. One, who is the Jesus in which you claim to believe? And two, is believing in Christ sufficient? Is trusting Christ enough to save a person, or do you need something else? Many religious groups would say, "If you trust Christ, PLUS live by our religious system, you'll be Ok." Is that biblical Christianity?

We've identified the first substitute which muddies the water of the term "Christian." It's easy to settle for ritual instead of reality. Ritual doesn't save. Ritual can't change a person. Only the reality of Christ can.

II. Substitute #2: It's easy to settle for religion instead of a relationship (28-29).

Consider an important question. Is Christianity a religion? In one sense, it certainly is. James wrote, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world (1:27)." The term "religion" is not bad. Christians are certainly not "irreligious." But, on the other hand, calling Christianity a "religion" is misleading.

Why? It has to do with the following question. What's the difference between viewing Christianity as a "religion" and viewing it as a "relationship" with Christ?

A. The emphasis in religion is on externals.

V 28 "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh." Remember, Paul is writing in ch 2 to a religious Jew, to a person who presumed he was Ok because of his nationality as a Jew. To that

person, Paul says, "Wait a minute. Who is a Jew, anyway? Is a Jew merely a person who went through some external religious rite like circumcision? No."

The problem with Judaism was its preoccupation with externals ("flesh" v 28; "the letter" v 29). Jeremiah called attention to this danger long before Paul. He wrote in Jer 4:4, "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, and take away the foreskins of your heart, ye men of Judah...lest my fury come forth like fire..."

God's not impressed with externals. It's the heart He's after. Moses anticipated the day when God would free His people's preoccupation with externals, in Ex 30:6, "And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live."

Mere religion emphasizes externals. We need to be frank. In its 2,000 year history, the system of Christianity has developed a lot of external "trimmings" and "baggage." Just like Judaism did. We tend to think if a person has the "trimmings" he must have the real thing, too. That's not necessarily so.

A person can have a Bible on their coffee table, and not be a real Christian. A person can have a picture of Jesus on their family room wall, and not be a real Christian. A person can be zealous in attending worship services, can participate in the sacraments, can recite all the liturgy, and not be a Christian.

What's missing from that person's life? A personal, life-changing relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

B. The emphasis in a relationship is on the internal.

If being a "Jew" is more than externals, what does it take? Paul writes in v 29, "But he is a Jew who..." Notice that a person who is a "true Jew," that is, a person who is really right with God, is concerned with four things. What are they? One, the "inward." Two, the "heart." And three, matters pertaining to the "spirit." And four, not the praise of men, but the praise of God.

The LB paraphrased it this way, "A real Jew is anyone who has his heart right with God." The Phillips said, "The true Jew is one who belongs to God in heart." That's it. Biblical Christianity is not a religion, but a relationship with Jesus Christ. And the focus of that relationship is not on externals, but on the internal.

Not that being a Christian is something that is so private that it can't be seen. Not at all. You can't help but see the evidence of Christ when it flows from the heart of one who enjoys a relationship with the Savior!

Religion is like a wedding ring (McGee, 53). My wedding ring doesn't make me a married man. Even if I lost my ring, I'd still be married to my wife. My ring is an outward symbol of my relationship with her. If you put my ring on, it would not make you her husband, would it? Marriage is more than a ring.

Christianity is more than externals. It's a relationship. And a life of obedience is the symbol, the evidence that I have that relationship.

Conclusion: Ask yourself two questions...

There's an eternal question we must all ask ourselves this morning. It's this. Do I have the REAL thing? Most of us, by virtue of the fact that we are sitting in

church on Sunday morning would call ourselves by the name "Christian." But do we have the real thing?

You say, "How can I tell if I've got the real thing?" Ask yourself two important questions.

1. Have I settled for ritual instead of reality?

Circumcision didn't save a Jew. Nor does baptism, or communion, or church attendance, or religious activity save us. So I ask you, "Is Christ REAL in your life, or are you settling for the substitute of meaningless ritual?"

2. Have I settled for religion instead of a relationship with Jesus Christ?

Do you know Jesus Christ? Does He know you? Are you resting in rules and regulations, or in Christ?

How important is your relationship with Christ? Where does it fit on your list of priorities? I challenge you to make your relationship with Christ your #1 priority. Set aside time every day to read His Word, and to pray. Block out time each week to worship Him with your church family. Get involved in serving Him. Tell others about Him. And do it all because you love Him.

Response: Perhaps you would admit, "I'm not sure I have the real thing, but I want to. How do I go about becoming a Christian?" You must do two things. First, you must repent (that means, you must admit that you are a sinner, that you know you need to change, that you are willing to change). And second, you must trust Christ (by receiving Christ as your Savior and Lord, you are saying, "I no longer am trusting in ritual or religion to save me. I am now trusting Christ alone.").

By the way, you may be a Christian, yet your Christian life has been hung up on peripherals, on external issues. What do you need to do? First, you as well need to repent and turn from the substitutes. And second, recommit your life to Christ. Make your relationship with Him your #1 priority in your life.