

## The Latest Fashion in Fig Leaves

Got Religion? – Part IV

Romans 2:25-28

### Introduction

If you will open your Bibles to the book of Genesis, I want to show you the first religious act in human history. I want to spend at least half of our time in Genesis, beginning with chapter 2, as I set the stage for what Paul has to say, centuries later, in Romans, chapter 2.

Satan has come to tempt Eve in the garden. Adam and Eve were both told by God not to eat of the tree that represented the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve had been created by God as innocent, but given the ability to make a choice – a choice that we refer to as the act of a free moral agent. God did not create robots who loved Him and obeyed Him without having the ability to choose. He created us with the choice to fulfill the greatest commandment given to mankind; that is, as recorded in Matthew, chapter 22, verse 37,

*. . . You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.*

And, one of the evidences of true love for God is obedience to His commandments. In fact, in I John, chapter 2, verses 3 through 5, we read,

*And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him*

You might say, "But no one can be perfect in keeping the commandments."

That is true. However, the true believer desires to keep them, where the unbeliever does not. And, the true believer admits his guilt and shame, where the unredeemed covers it up, defends it, justifies it, or perhaps, denies it. The mark of the believer is not perfection in life, but a pattern in life of desiring and choosing to obey Christ and walk after Him.

God warned Adam in Genesis, chapter 2, verses 16 and 17,

*And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die."*

Adam was given the choice to obey or disobey.

This also tells us that man was physically immortal. Adam had not yet committed sin, but, as God warns him, in these verses, if he chooses to sin, it will bring about the consequence of physical death. That consequence exists to this day, by the way, for we are told in Romans, chapter 6, verse 23a,

*For the wages of sin is death . . .*

In other words, one of the undeniable proofs that we have Adam's nature and have chosen to sin as well, is that we will all experience the same consequence – we will all physically die.

Chapter 3 of Genesis opens with the serpent, inhabited by Satan, coming to tempt Eve. He reveals

the beauty and goodness of the delicious fruit of that one tree from which God had told her never to eat.

Is that not just like temptation? You can have every tree but one – and guess which one you want.

Tell a kid, “Listen, you can have the jelly beans in this jar and the m & m’s in that jar, but don’t touch the marshmallows in the other jar.”

All of a sudden, marshmallows become the thing that kid craves for – they become his greatest desire.

I remember a live television program where children were observed being tempted. One at a time, they were brought into a room where they were seated. The adult placed, in front of them, some sweets on a plate. Then, the adult told them, “I have to leave for a minute. Don’t eat anything, but when I get back, I’ll give you as much as you want.”

The grownup would then leave and the camera would record the child’s battle with temptation.

- One little girl stared at the plate and then, began to talk to herself out loud to take her mind off the temptation.
- Another girl looked at the plate, swinging her legs back and forth and then, as if she could not take it any longer, covered her eyes with her hands.
- A little boy looked at it, fidgeting all over the chair and then, began to loudly sing to take his mind off of it.
- Still another got up and walked as far away from the plate as he could get, muttering to himself over and over again.

Those were pretty good solutions! I think the best one was the kid who got up and walked away. In other words, if you cannot see it, the chances are, you are not going to want it.

What the text tells us about Eve is that she did not walk away from it, she walked over to it! And, she took a closer look! Notice chapter 3, verse 6.

***When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.***

There is a three-fold temptation:

- the physical lure – “. . . the tree was good for food . . .”,

- the emotional lure – “. . . [the tree] was a delight to the eyes . . .”, and
- the intellectual lure – “. . . the tree was desirable to make one wise . . .”.

This sin makes perfect sense.

I have talked to people, over the years, who have the most logical sounding rhetoric for defending their sin – physical reasoning, emotional feelings, and intellectual defenses – “What I’m doing can’t be wrong.”

That only revealed the depth of their deception, for they have been blinded by the god of this world to the fact that the consequences of their sin are just around the corner.

## **Not So Wonderful “Firsts” In the Book of Beginnings**

You have heard that the book of Genesis is the book of “Beginnings”. Most of the beginnings are wonderful things. However, within this passage are a number of “firsts” that are not so wonderful.

### **God has been disobeyed**

1. This is the first time in human history that God has been disobeyed.

And that is not all, look at verse 7a.

***Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked . . .***

### **Human beings have experienced shame**

2. This is the first time human beings have experienced shame.

Their innocence was gone forever. They were ashamed of their nakedness.

This passage continues on to reveal, in verse 7b, . . . ***and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings.***

### **Mankind has attempted to self-cleanse**

3. This is the first time that mankind has attempted to self-cleanse.

Up to this point, everything they had was provided by God. But now, knowing they had disobeyed God, they could not very well ask Him to make coverings for them to hide their shame. So they do it themselves. They attempt to hide their sense of guilt and shame as a result of having sinned.

### Humans have performed a religious act

4. Ladies and gentlemen, this is the first religious act in human history.

Continue to verse 8a.

*And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day .*

..

This is not the sound of God's voice, but the literal sound of the Lord God walking. Evidently, God would take some physical form, manifesting Himself in some literal, physical way that could be known to the senses of Adam and Eve. This is what theologians call a "theophany" or "christophany". He would come to the garden and literally, walk with Adam and Eve in sweet, intimate fellowship.

The text says, in verse 8b,

*. . . and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.*

### Mankind has hidden from God

5. This is the first reference to mankind having hidden from God.

This is the very first time mankind has been seen attempting to escape the gaze of God.

"But I thought they had their fig leaves on?!"

They had dealt with their sin and shame and created fig coverings. Why not just parade in front of God and say, "Look what we made."

I will tell you why. Because for them, then, and for mankind today, religion seems to make sense until you stand in the presence of a holy God who knows everything about you. The Bible tells us that nothing is hidden from His sight.

Look at verse 9.

*Then the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"*

### God has sought after man

6. This is the first time God is seen as seeking after man.

Man hides from God, but God seeks after man.

Jesus Christ said, in Luke, chapter 19, verse 10b, *. . . [I have] come to seek and to save that which was lost.*

In John, chapter 4, verse 23b, we are told,

*. . . the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks . . .*

Here, in Genesis, is the first record of God on a search and deliver mission.

Continue to verse 10.

*And [Adam] said, "I heard the sound of Thee in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself."*

### Man was afraid

7. Did you notice the man's admission, ". . . I was afraid . . ."? This is the very first time the verb, "to be afraid," appears in the Bible.

You might say again, "Adam, you've got your fig leaves. There's nothing to be afraid of."

My friend, talk to the most devout person you know who does not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Talk to the man or woman who does everything in their power for other people. They never miss mass or any service of the church, they give away money, they volunteer at the library, they even teach a Sunday school class at their local assembly. They are doing their very best. Ask them how they feel about meeting God one day. If they are honest, they will say, "I am afraid."

Aren't we all? Yes, in certain ways we all are. Well then, how do you ever dare to come boldly into the presence of God? Hebrews, chapter 10, verse 19, tells us that we can enter the very presence of God with boldness by the blood of Jesus Christ. Applied to our hearts, that gives us, as verse 22 says, "full assurance of faith . . .".

My friend, if you do not have faith in Christ alone for your salvation –

- you can come to church, attend a Bible study, and you might even teach one – but that is just a fig leaf,
- you can pray prayers every night and every morning – but you have done nothing but put on your fig leaf apron,
- you can give money to church or give it all away – but you are just covering up with a fig leaf.

If you have never dealt with your sin and you are simply attempting to cover over your sin with the works of your hands, you might have an incredibly

impressive fig leaf outfit, but when God appears, you will want to run and hide.

Look at Genesis, chapter 3, verses 11 and 12.

*And He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" And the man said, "The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate."*

"She made me do it! And, she was Your idea, Lord. I didn't ask for her, You gave her to me. And, she made me do it."

I can just imagine Eve standing there, infuriated. The blood was rushing to her head. That little vein in her neck was about ten times the size God ever intended it to be.

Continue to verse 13.

*Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" And the woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."*

"Oh," says Adam, "you get all over me for putting the blame on you, but now look at you putting the blame on the snake. What a hypocrite you are!"

There Adam and Eve go, "Yap, yap, yap, yap, yap!"

### **Mankind has experienced marital disharmony**

8. This is all recorded in the original Hebrew. This is the first indication in human history that marriage counselors are going to make an awful lot of money. This is the first moment of marital disharmony.

Before the day began, there was perfect fellowship between Adam and Eve, and between Adam, Eve, and God. There was no sin to ruin paradise.

But now, there is sin, shame, fear, blame, guilt, and . . . the very first sighting of manmade religion to cover it all over – in the form of two aprons, made from fig leaves.

## **Three Principles Concerning the Inadequacy of Fig Leaves**

That has really never changed. Manmade religion has always had a lot in common with fig

leaves. Let me suggest at least three things they have in common.

### **Fig leaves are man's ceremonial attempt to avoid accountability**

1. Fig leaves are man's ceremonial attempt to avoid accountability.

Man does not want to admit there is something about himself that is wrong or sinful, so he just covers himself up with religious ceremony and ritual. I personally believe that there are people who treat church like fig leaves – they will hide inside church. And the average church says, "That's fine with us – you can hide in here. We'll never talk about God or sin or redemption or guilt . . . You're safe in here with us."

Do you think you can hide from God in church? Do you think you can hide from God anywhere?

David said, in Psalm, chapter 139, verses 8 through 12a,

*If I ascend to heaven, Thou art there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, Thou art there. If I take the wings of the dawn, if I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, even there Thy hand will lead me, and Thy right hand will lay hold of me. If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me, and the light around me will be night," even darkness is not dark to Thee, and the night is as bright as the day. . . .*

You cannot avoid final accountability to God. You cannot hide from Him behind your religious fig leaves.

### **Fig leaves are man's desperate attempt to salve a guilty conscience**

2. Secondly, fig leaves are man's desperate attempt to salve a guilty conscience.

The truth is, mankind, according to Romans, chapter 2, has a conscience that God created in him. It whispers to him that he is sinful and naked before God.

Man knows he is naked and he is filled with shame. "I'll burn a candle . . . Anoint me with oil . . . Put water on my body . . . I'll give away some money. Please, will somebody silence the shame?!"

Religion is man's most popular method for silencing a guilty conscience.

### **Fig leaves are man's self-centered attempt to impress others and ignore true godliness**

3. Thirdly, fig leaves are man's self-centered attempt to impress others and ignore true godliness.

Fast forward the tape of human history and you arrive in the first century where the religion, first begun by Adam and Eve, flourished. It was the religion of pious appearances and pietistic activities, without purity of heart or a personal relationship with God.

Jesus Christ said of the religious leaders in His day, as recorded in Matthew, chapter 13, verses 5 through 7,

*But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries . . . And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi.*

The words of Christ cut through the fig aprons of religious pride and piety and He said, in verse 28 of that same chapter,

*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you outwardly appear righteous to men . . .*

In other words, "All your leaves are in place!"  
*. . . but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and sin.*

In the eyes of man, the religious person has it all together. If God is impressed with anybody, He is impressed with the faithful Jew. Paul has given all the reasons why. They were proud to have the Law, or the Torah, they were moral, upstanding men and women who spoke respectfully of God and knew His will. They taught the truth of the Torah and moral guidelines to others. They sounded good; they seemed to have it all down to a system.

But Paul, by the inspiring influence of the Holy Spirit, pulled off the mask and revealed that their lips praised Jehovah, but their hearts were far from Him. And, Paul anticipated their response.

The faithful Jew was backed into a corner. He knew he did not love God; he knew his heart was far from God.

Paul knew the faithful Jew would fall back on one last defense. Surely he was right with God, because he had the mark of the covenant. He had been circumcised according to the covenant command and promise of God to Abraham.

This is the Jews last card to play; this is their last hope after being exposed as sinners; this is their fig leaf.

## **Three Principles Concerning the Inadequacy of Religious Rituals**

Paul will present three basic principles to reveal that circumcision is just another fashion in fig leaves.

### **Religious rituals cannot replace righteous living**

1. The first principle is, religious rituals cannot replace righteous living.

Look at Romans, chapter 2, verse 25. Again Paul anticipates their response of, "But I'm circumcised." He says,

*For indeed, circumcision is of value IF you practice the law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.*

In other words, religious rituals, even if they are, in and of themselves, an act of obedience, do not count as a replacement for godly living.

Now, rituals may have their place and they may have their value. Paul is not saying that the outward ritual is a worthless thing. He is simply saying that a symbol of obedience is worthless without a lifestyle of obedience.

He goes on to say, in verse 26,

*If therefore the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?*

In other words, the man who lives a godly life and has never been circumcised is better off than the man who has been circumcised and does not care about keeping the Law.

Why? Because circumcision was a physical mark of people who were dedicated to God and to His Word. It represented a heart of love for God and a life of holy distinction. But, what was better? To have the mark and not love God and be disobedient or to not have the mark and love God?

The answer is obvious. As God spoke through the prophet Samuel concerning animal sacrifices in I Samuel, chapter 15, verse 22,

*And Samuel said, "Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in*

*obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice . . .”*

God never intended for faith to be placed in the physical mark, but for faith to be placed in God Himself. The people had begun to believe that the mark was good enough, even without an internal relationship with God.

Imagine that I put on a white carnation and told you, “This is the sign of my covenant to love my family. I’m going to wear this carnation as a symbol of my commitment and love for my four children and my wife.”

Then, every time you see me, you see that white carnation and you think, “Man, that guy is committed to his family.”

Now, suppose you see me acting in a selfish way toward my family. Maybe you see me yelling at my kids in the church parking lot. You are going to really have to use your imagination! You come up to me and say, “Hey, that doesn’t seem to be a very loving thing to do.”

And I say, “Hey, don’t you see my carnation? It’s right here, pal. Are you blind?!”

You say, “But I heard what you said to your family.”

“Hey, who cares? Forget my family; forget my wife. I’ve got a carnation, and that’s all that matters.”

My friends, I made that carnation null and void. In fact, I made it into a symbol of hypocrisy.

The Jew was saying, “Forget the Law; forget a heart of love for God; forget obedience to His Word. I’ve got the mark of circumcision, and that’s all that matters.”

Do you see what Paul is doing here?

All the Jew had was a ritual – without the reality of what it was supposed to mean.

### **Trust in external activity will not protect against eternal accountability**

2. The second principle is, trust in external activity will not protect against eternal accountability.

Paul goes on, in Romans, chapter 2, verse 27, to write,

*And will not he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter*

*of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law?*

The rabbis taught, during the days of Paul, that no circumcised man would ever see hell. In one Jewish writing it said, “Circumcision saves from hell.”

Even in the Midrash, it said, “God swore to Abraham that no one who was circumcised would be sent to hell.”

The Jew felt safe – just as the religious man today, feels safe in his baptism and in his church duties and in his moral reputation.

Can you imagine the Jew being told, in verse 27, that they could be judged by a Gentile? The implication is that, if they could be judged by a Gentile, what hope would they have before the throne of God?

That thought must have shocked their minds and literally, rocked their security and sense of safety.

### **Religious roots do not guarantee God’s approval**

3. The third principle is, religious roots do not guarantee God’s approval.

Continue to Romans, chapter 2, verses 28 through 29a.

*For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly . . .*

Here was another shocking truth. Being a Jew was more than a physical mark and a bloodline back to Abraham. It was a matter of the heart.

Religion will always emphasize the work of the hands; Christianity emphasizes the condition of your heart. Religion will always focus on what we do; approval with God focuses on why we do it.

Do you pray? Why? Do you give money to the church? Why? Do you fast? Why? Do you live a moral life? Why?

Religion never asks why you do what you do; God does. The prophet Samuel recorded, in I Samuel, chapter 16, verse 7b,

*. . . man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.*

Religion is busy making aprons out of fig leaves; God is at work on the heart.

### **Application –**

## How Do We Do Away With Fig Leaves?

So, how do we do away with fig leaves? Let me suggest three ways.

### Fig leaves must be acknowledged as thoroughly inadequate

1. Fig leaves must be acknowledged as thoroughly inadequate.

For Adam and Eve, their fig leaf outfits were a good idea. They probably thought to themselves, and said to each other, “There, that’ll take care of our shame.”

But it did not – it could not. All they had to show for their sewing lesson was more guilt, more shame, and uncertainty.

Fig leaves just cannot cover sin.

### Fig leaves must be exchanged with true confession

2. Fig leaves must be exchanged with true confession.

I saw another illustration of false religion in the newspaper recently. It was in an article on a church in Los Angeles. The church has several thousand members and is led by a pastor named Michael Beckwith. One parishioner said, “It’s never boring or fearful or full of guilt.”

The news reporter glowingly stated that, “In an era where many claim they are spiritual and turn away from authority and text, Agape seems to meet their longing for connection and celebration without fretting over theological niceties or doctrinal demands on faith or practice. There is no talk of damnation here.”

“We don’t believe we are born into sin,” says Pastor Beckwith, “we are born into blessings. While some seek salvation, we call it, ‘self-elevation’. This is not some New Age religion; this is ‘new thought’ combined with ancient wisdom.”

I agree – that it is ancient. It goes all the way back to Genesis, chapter 3, where two people came up with their own religion that seemed so wise. There was no damnation there; it was a way to feel better about themselves. And it seemed so wise – until God showed up!

The trouble with this religious menagerie is, if you do not talk about sin, then you cannot have a

Savior, and if you do not talk about judgment, then you cannot have a Redeemer.

You might be religious and you might even call it church, but you are really only involved in creating the latest fashion in fig leaves.

### Fig leaves must be replaced with God’s atoning substitute

3. Fig leaves must be replaced with God’s atoning substitute.

Mankind’s first religious act was sewing fig leaves together. God’s first redemptive act was taking the life of an innocent animal, killing it, skinning it, and making, for this couple, a fur-lined, leather apron to wear.

Was it just that leather was better than leaves?

No, it was a matter of sacrifice. In order for them to live, something had to die. For you to be forgiven, Someone has to atone for your sin. Someone has to die to take your punishment for sin, so you can go free.

And, in the first few pages of Genesis, there lies the picture of the coming sacrifice, Who would die for the sins of the world.

In a New Testament book, written especially to Jews, entitled the book of Hebrews, the writer said this, in chapter 10, verses 10 through 12,

***By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God***

Skip to verse 14,

***For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.***

Continue to verses 16 through 17,

***“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days,” says the Lord: “I will put My laws upon their heart, and on their mind I will write them . . . And their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.”***

Fig leaves will never do that. Jesus Christ and atoning sacrifice, for you and for me, can.

So, if you have not already, I encourage you to  
put away whatever happens to be your latest fashion

| in fig leaves – put away the leaves, and give your  
heart to the Lord.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/11/2001 by Stephen Davey.

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