

The Heart of the Matter

Got Religion? – Part V

Romans 2:29

Introduction

For nearly thirty years, a man by the name of Reuben Mattus had been selling ice cream in New York. It was his family's own recipe and he made a modest living selling it. Then, Reuben had an inspiration. He had lived in this new country during the boom times of the 1930's, 1940's, and 1950's. He had lived long enough to understand that most Americans were convinced that the best foods were exotic foods, originating from somewhere else in the world. So, in 1959, Mr. Reuben Mattus invented Haagen-Dazs ice cream. It was the same family recipe, with a few minor changes and a few new flavors. This time, however, it was marketed under an exotic, difficult to pronounce, made up name. He also had a map of Scandinavia printed on the ice cream cartons. With that, sales took off. The rest is ice cream history.

What Reuben Mattus had discovered was not just a better way to sell ice cream, but a better understanding of human nature. In every culture, at any time, image means everything!

Today, as we conclude our series of studies on Religion and the Road to Hell, we come to the end of chapter 2 in the book of Romans. In this latter part of chapter 2, Paul has identified the most religious person of his day and revealed that his religion was a façade – an image, without true substance.

Paul has delivered the stunning news to his generation, and to ours, that it is possible to be religious without being redeemed. The illustration that Paul has used, in verses 17 through 29, has been the life of the Jew.

The Jew had the right name printed on the carton – they had the mark of the covenant as the company label on each package. As far as marketing religion went, they were the best sellers. If anybody wanted religion, they could get it from the faithful Jew.

Paul reveals that the faithful Jew is relying on the wrong things – the external image and the physical mark of circumcision. This is like people today, who rely on the physical things they do.

If you ask someone whether they think they will go to heaven when they die, they will likely say, "Of course, I've been baptized," or, "Yes, I'm a member of so and so church," or, "Yes, I've always been a pretty good person."

Hidden in their answer is the deception of "religiosity". Religion has to do with the name on the ice cream carton and whether or not it will sell, regardless of whether or not it is even true. Religion will always focus on what we create with our hands; God is interested in the condition of our heart.

The Contrasting Vocabulary

In verses 28 and 29 of Romans, chapter 2, Paul uses contrasting vocabulary to subtly, yet forcefully reveal the difference between religious image and a relationship with God. Look at those verses.

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; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

You could underline the contrasts:

Outwardly - Inwardly

1. In verse 28, between the faithful Jew, who relied on that which was outwardly, and true spirituality, which was inwardly.

Flesh - Heart

2. In verse 29a, between circumcision, which concentrates on the flesh, and true spirituality, which concentrates on the heart.

Letter (of the Law) - Spirit

3. In verse 29b, between the letter (a reference to the Law) and the Spirit.

Man's praise – God's praise

4. In verse 29c, between man's praise and the praise of God.

Religion – Relationship (with God)

So, you have contrasted:

- outwardly with inwardly,
- flesh with heart,
- letter (of the Law) with Spirit, and
- man's praise with God's praise.

Such is the contrast of:

- religion with a true relationship with God.

The Jew would have been stunned by this paragraph. It was shocking for them to hear that, having descended from Abraham, having the responsibility of guarding the Torah, and having the past history of blessing did not make them automatically right with God.

Circumcision of the flesh, Paul said, is not as important as having a circumcised heart. In fact, Paul's point is that an uncircumcised heart makes null and void circumcised flesh.

That was not something new to Paul, by the way. Several times, in the Old Testament, the prophets warned Israel that their rebellious hearts nullified the mark of the covenant.

Jeremiah spoke for God and said, in chapter 9, verses 25 through 26,

“Behold the days are coming,” declares the Lord, “that I will punish all who are circumcised and yet uncircumcised . . . for all the nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised of heart.”

Leviticus, chapter 26, verses 38 through 42, says,

But you will perish among the nations, and your enemies' land will consume you. So those of you who may be left will rot away because of their iniquity in the lands of your enemies; and also because of the iniquities of their forefathers they will rot away with them. If they confess their iniquity . . . or if their uncircumcised heart becomes humbled so that they then make amends for their iniquity, then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and My covenant with Abraham as well, and I will remember the land.

The Lord spoke to Samuel long ago, and said, in I Samuel, chapter 16, verse 7b,

. . . God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.

In other words, being right with God is a matter of the heart!

By the way, what does the word “heart” refer to?

In the Hebrew Bible, the most common word for “heart” is the word “leb”. It refers not only to the motives, feelings, affections, and desires of a person, but also to their will, goals, thoughts, and intellect.

In the New testament, the word, basically, refers to the same thing. The Greek word is “kardia,” from which we created our words, such as, cardiologist or cardiology.

Gerhard Kittel, in his massive, nine volume work on the Greek New Testament, which anchors one shelf of my library, described the “kardia” as,

The center of the inner life of man and the source of all the forces and functions of soul and spirit. It stands for the whole of the inner being of man.ⁱ

Basically, the word “heart” refers to the true person. Regardless of the person's name on the carton, regardless of the map and the marketing terminology printed on the package, the “heart” refers to what truly resides on the inside.

The faithful Jew thought God's work was done on the outside. The man who had been born a Jew and the woman who had conceived by a circumcised Jew were externally adhering to God. They were safely within the covenant of Abraham and, in fact, were direct descendants of Abraham. What more could be needed to be accepted by God? The Jew believed that Abraham sat by the gate of hell and that no faithful Jew would ever enter its gates.

Romans, Chapter 2, Compared To John, Chapter 3

It struck me, as I studied this passage in Romans, chapter 2, that Paul uses the exact same vocabulary as Jesus Christ used, about thirty years earlier, in a conversation with a faithful Jew.

Do you remember, in Romans, chapter 2, verse 20, that Paul challenged the Jew, saying the fact that they considered themselves teachers of the Law, did not make them good enough? Well, one of those teachers had a private conversation with Jesus that would, eventually, revolutionize his life.

Turn to John, chapter 3, where that private conversation took place, and where Jesus Christ defined salvation as a new birth and heartfelt belief. Also, perhaps the most famous Bible verse is in this passage. Many of us have memorized John, chapter 3, verse 16,

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

While many of us know that verse, few of us, perhaps, know to whom Jesus said those words. We are told who, in verse 1 of chapter 3. We will start there.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews

If the faithful Jews that Paul refers to, in Romans, chapter 2, believed that they were going to get into heaven – of all of them, there were none who would have had more assurance of getting to heaven than Nicodemus.

Why? First, because he was a Pharisee.

Now, most of the time, when you think of a Pharisee, you think of a hypocrite – a proud, legalistic man who played a religious game, but lived a life of secret immorality. And you would be right, for many of them were just that.

There were, however, others who were committed and faithful to their decision in life to join the Pharisees. The apostle Paul was once a Pharisee himself.

These were Jewish men who, because of their passion for the God of Abraham, joined the “chaburah” – the “brotherhood”. They entered into this brotherhood by taking a pledge, in front of three witnesses, that they would spend all their lives observing every detail of the Mosaic and scribal law.

The scribes had created the *Mishnah* – the writings that codified scribal law. Then, there was the *Talmud*. This was the commentary on the *Mishnah* that the Pharisees studied, taught, and followed to the letter. It was their passion to know the *Mishnah* and live it. I read of one rabbi who spent nearly three years studying just one chapter from the *Mishnah*. I received my inspiration from him!

The codifying of the Law brought about many of the problems to Judaism. The Pharisee became obsessed with rule upon rule, until their relationship with God was lost in their religion.

A perfect illustration is seen in the simple Sabbath Law of Moses. The Bible told the Israelite to rest on the Sabbath. This meant, simply, do not bear burdens, do not work, but rest and keep it a holy day.

The trouble is, what does the word “work” mean? The scribe and the Pharisee debated and developed and codified it, and developed commentary on it as well.

Here are some examples of what they came up with:

- they could only drink enough milk for one swallow at a time – more than one swallow at a time would be work for their mouths
- they could not lift a spoon to their lips weighing more than one fig – more than that would be lifting a burden.

The Pharisees and scribes were embroiled over whether or not a woman could wear a broach on the Sabbath, whether a mother could pick up her baby, or even if a man could wear his wooden dentures on the Sabbath.

It was work to tie a knot on the Sabbath or to untie a knot. However, it was permissible for a woman, who was getting dressed on the Sabbath, to tie a knot in her girdle. Thank heaven for that!

It was permissible to draw water from the well on the Sabbath, but if the rope broke, you could not tie another rope to the broken one because you would be tying a knot. However, you could take your wife's girdle, tie one side to another rope, tie another side of the girdle to the bucket, and draw water from your well. I am not kidding!

On the one hand you think, "How ridiculous!" – yet, on the other hand, here is a people who are committed to the incredible inconvenience of keeping thousands of regulations in order to please God. How many of us will allow even a dozen inconveniences in our walk with God? It is my observation that one inconvenience is enough to discourage most of us.

It was the scribe who expounded and developed all the written regulations. It was the Pharisee who dedicated their lives to keeping them. Our text says, Nicodemus was one of those men.

The latter part of verse 1 informs us that Nicodemus was a "ruler of the Jews." The Greek word for "ruler" is "archon," which indicated that Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin. This was Israel's Supreme court, which was made up of seventy one men.

It is interesting to consider that one of the chief responsibilities of the Sanhedrin was to examine and deal with anyone suspected of being a false prophet. So, Nicodemus has come to Jesus, during the night, to examine Him further to determine whether or not He was a false teacher.

Now notice John, chapter 3, verse 2.

This man came to Him by night, and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."

You need to understand the significance of this statement. By now, the debate was already raging as to the source of Jesus' power. Some religious leaders had said it came from Beelzebub, or Satan. Nicodemus is letting the Lord know that he is not one of them. He is, in effect, saying, "Jesus, I really think You have pure motives and You have come from God as an inspired teacher."

He was also, in a polite way, saying, "Teacher, I know You have come from God and have the power of God. I saw you clean out the temple this morning and declare it to be your Father's house. But, what are you really trying to communicate? What is your primary message?"

Jesus responds by giving Nicodemus his primary message, in verse 3.

Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

This is a shocking statement! Why? Because Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, Nicodemus, unless you are born again you cannot go to heaven."

Jesus just told one of the leading Jewish candidates for heaven that – he was not going! In other words, Nicodemus has done a lot of things right, but he has not done the right thing!

And Nicodemus, being a faithful Jew, has always assumed that he is already part of the kingdom of God. He is a son of Abraham – he has a right to heaven! Just as Paul delivered the shocking news, in Romans, chapter 2, to his Jewish audience, Jesus Christ delivers the shocking news to this faithful Jewish leader.

This is not only a shocking statement, but a difficult statement. Continue to verse 4.

Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"

In other words, "What do you mean I have to be 'born again'?"

He was confused. And so would we be, were it not for a passage like John, chapter 3.

Two Propositions On Salvation and Being Born Again

Jesus will explain Himself by delivering to Nicodemus two startling propositions. They will change his thinking forever on the matter of true salvation and what it means to be born again.

The physical birth into Abraham's family was not for redemption

1. The first proposition is that the physical birth into Abraham's family was not for redemption.

That is the same thing Paul has been saying in Romans, chapter 2.

Notice verse 5 of John, chapter 3.

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

Now, just what does “of water” refer to? Is it:

- a reference to the cleansing aspect of the New Covenant,
- a reference to the cleansing of the Word,
- another reference to the Holy Spirit,
- a reference to John the Baptist and his water baptism of repentance, or
- a reference to the necessity of water baptism?

Jesus was not teaching that the new birth comes through water baptism. In fact, in the New Testament, baptism is connected with death, not birth. And, while water baptism is necessary for spiritual obedience, it is not necessary for spiritual birth.

My friend, I was baptized by water many years ago, not so I could go to be with the Lord, but so that I could show publicly that I am going to be with the Lord.

In verse 5, Jesus is not talking about being baptized the first time, but about being born a second time.

Verse 6 explains verse 5.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit .

“Born of the flesh” is the natural first birth; “born of the Spirit” is the supernatural second birth.

So, in this analogy by Jesus, being born of water is a reference to physical birth. It is interesting that the Greek words are “ex hudatos” and can be literally translated, “born out of water”. It is also insightful that in the Hebrew language, the word “to give birth” is a word that literally refers to the rupturing of the membranes.

I have seen the results of that very thing. I will not bore you with gory details, but I remember being in that delivery room with Marsha when we were about to have our fourth child. I say “we” rather generously. We were in the labor and delivery room and the medical personnel came in and broke her water.

Until then, our baby has been floating in a sack filled with amniotic fluid – we refer to that as the “water”. The doctor, by breaking the sack, basically let the water out of the swimming pool. And just like you and I, no one wants to swim in a pool without any water. This was the incentive for the baby to get out of the pool. I am using layman’s terms, but I can tell you are getting it!

Our children, and your children; in fact, all of us were literally born “ex hudatos,” or “out of water”.

That is what verse 5 is referring to, when it says “ex hudatos” – the physical birth.

Jesus will go on to say that there has to be a second, different birth. Why make mention of the first birth to Nicodemus? Was that not a moot point?

Well, that was what every Jew was counting on. Like Nicodemus, they thought that physical birth sealed it for them. They were born into Abraham’s family and that was it, case closed! They were Jews – they were in the kingdom!

Jesus is delivering the startling news that the first birth of Nicodemus was not good enough! The physical birth is not enough for redemption.

Continue in John, chapter 3, verses 7 through 13.

“Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen; and you do not receive our witness. If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how shall you believe if I tell you heavenly things? And no one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven, even the Son of Man.”

The second birth cannot occur unless the Messiah experiences death

2. The second proposition is that the second birth cannot occur unless the Messiah experiences death.

This was a startling proposition to this faithful Jew. Not only was he told that his physical birth was not good enough for redemption, but Jesus now tells him that the second birth cannot occur unless the Messiah experiences death.

Continue to verses 14 and 15.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life.

These verses refer us back to one of the most unique stories in the Old Testament. In the book of

Numbers, chapter 21, verses 4 through 9, you discover the Israelites are in rebellion against God.

In judging Israel, God set poisonous snakes upon them. The Bible called them “fiery serpents,” because the hot fever, that ultimately led to death, was the predominate result of the serpent’s venom.

The people cried out for mercy and God gave Moses instructions. He was to make a brass serpent, put it on a long wooden pole, and hold it up in the midst of the camp. Then, he was to tell the people of Israel that anyone who simply looked up at the brass serpent would be healed and would live.

Why not develop medicine? Why not require them to work for a cure? That would have given them all something to do and would have satisfied every natural instinct of the heart to work on behalf of its own cure.

The fact that they were not told to make a human remedy is indicative of the greater fact that there is no human remedy for sin. Nothing but death is awaiting them, unless God provides the remedy.

Donald Grey Barnhouse wrote,

In the religious fashion of our day, there would have been a rush to incorporate the “Society for the Extermination of the Fiery Serpents”. There would have been badges for the coat lapel, cards for district workers, secretaries for organization branches, pledge cards and mass rallies. There would have been a publication office and a weekly journal to tell of the progress of the work. There would have been photographs of heaps of serpents that had been killed by the faithful workers. All of them feverishly trying, by human effort, to overcome the serpent’s bite of sin!

Let us accompany one of the zealous workers as he might take a pledge card into the tent of a stricken victim. The man had been bitten and the poison had already affected his limbs. He lies in feverish agony, the glaze of death already coming to his eyes. The zealous member of the Society for the Extermination of the Fiery Serpents tells him of all that has been done to combat the serpents, and urges the man to join. The dying victim fumbles in his pocketbook for money and then takes a pen in hand. His fingers are held by the worker who helps him form his signature on the pledge and membership card. The man signs in full and dies!

That incident, in Israel’s history, became a pre-figuring of Jesus Christ on a cross, lifted up, who became wicked sin for us. Salvation, spiritual healing, re-birth comes from simply looking at Him – and, in that look, believing that hope comes only from trust in Him.

Just as Jesus Christ told this religious leader that he was in desperate trouble, even though he had all the trappings of religion, you also can join a society, a church, sign a pledge card, go through Bible lessons and catechisms, give money, get baptized – and still die . . . without God.

You have been bitten by sin, and it is a mortal wound. Your only hope is to look to that wooden cross, upon which is the Lamb, made to be wicked sin for us. He is the One who descended from heaven and experienced death, so that He could provide, to those who trust in Him, a second birth.

John, chapter 3, verse 15, says,

that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life.

And what does it mean to believe?!

What did Philip mean when he asked the Ethiopian eunuch, in Acts, chapter 8, verse 37, if he believed with all of his heart? What do we mean when we say a person needs to ask Jesus Christ into their heart?

What did the apostle Paul mean when he said, in Romans, chapter 10, verse 9,

that if you confess with your mouth and believe in your heart that God raised [Christ] from the dead, you will be saved

What is this connection between believing and “the heart”.

You may remember, the heart refers to more than that pump inside your chest. In biblical terms, the heart refers to the inner person – the inner forces and functions of soul and spirit, mind and intellect. In other words, the heart refers to who you really are.

When Paul said to, “. . . believe in your heart that God raised [Christ] from the dead . . .”, he meant much more than someone simply saying, “Yea, I believe all that stuff.”

It actually means that all the forces and functions of soul and spirit, mind, will, and intellect are driven by the truth of Christ’s resurrection. Paul says, in effect, “If you are gripped by the truth that Christ is the living, resurrected Lord, and He controls and dominates your inner being, you shall be saved.”

When you ask Jesus Christ to come into your heart, if you are using the word “heart” biblically, then you are asking Jesus Christ to take up residency in the whole of your being, not just inhabit that red muscle that pumps away. You are saying that Christ is now the Landlord of your building. He owns the house; He calls the shots; He determines how life is to be lived.

You might say, “But I know people who do not believe in Christ, and they look good and sound good, they are committed to their family and are ethical in business. How do you know they don’t have the truth?”

Remember, religion is passionate about appearances. It focuses on the work of the hands, while ignoring the mortal wound of sin in the heart.

So what has religion done?

Imagine stumbling into an old, run down farm yard. It is windswept and nothing more than hard, baked ground. There is a well, and over the top of the well is a wooden platform and an old, rusty pump. You are dying of thirst. You step up onto the platform and begin to pump on that handle. It squeaks and complains with every push and pull. After five minutes, there is nothing but air. After fifteen minutes of sweating and coaxing and pleading, there is still nothing. The well is dry.

What do you do for water?

Let me tell you what religion has done. It has scraped all of the rust off of that pump handle and painted it bright red. Better yet, it has replaced the old handle with a shiny brass handle and there it shines in the farm yard, with class and dignity.

People from all around have come to look at that pump. They decide to build more of them. They dig a hole in the ground – never striking water. But then, they are not into water – they are into pumps. They build wooden platforms over the hole, and attach shiny pumps with beautiful handles. Some are elaborate; some are larger than others; some are inlaid with gold and silver. Songs have been composed about it, and painters have come and painted pictures of the landscape with its beautiful pumps.

However, nothing can be done about the fact that those beautiful, impressive pumps will never bring one drop of water to your thirsty lips.

Jesus Christ delivered the verdict to Nicodemus, “Nicodemus, you look good. You’re the best that society and religion and culture can produce, but you’re sitting on an empty well. You need to come in contact with living water.”

You come by way of a look – a look at the Son of Man, who came to earth and died for sinners. If you will look to Him and admit you are hopelessly bitten by sin and then, believe in your heart that He is the crucified and ascended Lord, you can go to heaven too, one day.

The Closing Verdict

The apostle Paul delivered the same verdict to the impressive, faithful Jew of his day, in Romans, chapter 2. The verdict is that,

The faithful Jew will not be saved by his Law

1. the faithful Jew will not be saved by his Law,

The faithful Jew will not be saved by his liturgy

2. the faithful Jew will not be saved by his liturgy, and

The faithful Jew will not be saved by his lineage

3. the faithful Jew will not be saved by his lineage.

In other words, do not put so much stock in the name on the outside of that carton; do not depend on the markings stamped on the package. All that matters is what is on the inside.

Religion is the road to hell simply because it cares only about the outside of the package. It looks good – and it sells.

Christianity is the road to heaven and it focuses on the condition of the heart. True Christianity is not into appearances and it does not sell anything – it transforms everything, beginning with the heart. Because at its very core, Christianity is a matter of the heart.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/18/2001 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Gerhard Kittel, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, quoted by Geoffrey W. Bromiley in Charles R. Swindoll: Coming To Terms With Sin (Waco, Texas, Word Publishing, 1985), p. 26.