

Romans 2:17-29 The Futility of Religion

(Introduction)

- You've probably heard some strange numbers about Japan's religious population. According to statistics by *Religion Yearbook (2017)*, there are more than 180 million believers of certain religions. The total population of Japan is about 126 million, so the religious population is about 1.5 times the total population. It means that there are some people believing in multiple religions.
- There is also a separate survey on whether people have faith in God. Only 8.7% replied "not believe in God". On the other hand, more than 70% of people "believe in God", or "believe in God but sometimes doubt", or "believe there is some supernatural power".
- From a sociological point of view, Christianity is also a religion. But according to Bible, the Gospel of Christ is fundamentally different from religion. Today, from the latter half of Chapter 2 of Romans, let's look at how the message of religion and the Gospel are fundamentally different.

Roman 2:17-29

17 But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God

18 and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law;

19 and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness,

20 an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—

21 you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal?

22 You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

23 You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.

24 For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

25 For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.

26 So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?

27 Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law.

28 For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.

29 But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

[Romans 2:17 -29]

- Let's learn three points from today's Scripture. First, no matter how good the teachings and messages of religion are, they cannot save us. Secondly, no religious ceremony can guarantee our salvation. Third, it is not religion that fundamentally changes us from the bottom of our hearts, but only the Gospel of Christ will save us. First, the futility of religious teachings. Secondly, the futility of religious ceremonies. Thirdly, the necessity of gospel instead of religion!

1. The Futility of Religious Teachings

- Today's Scriptures referred to the religious life of the Jews in 1st Century A.D. In particular, in Chapter 2 of Romans, you will feel that there is quite a severe criticism of the Jews. However, Paul did not mean to just criticize their religious life pointlessly.
- The attitude of the Jews, the teachings of the law, and the religious rites of circumcision, which are discussed here, were once believed by Paul himself wholeheartedly before he met Jesus.

Philippians 3:5-6

3: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;

6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

- Paul used to behave with the pride as a Jew, but when he looked back after meeting Jesus, he realized how futile it was. What kind of problems did he take up here? Verse 21 -23.
 - 2: 21 you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal?
 - 22 You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?
 - 23 You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.
- In other words, they understood the law and teachings of God well in their minds. However, they didn't apply them to their daily lives. They understood the theory, but didn't practice them in daily lives. They learned a lot about God's love from Bible, but did not love and obey God and love their neighbours from the bottom of their hearts.
- Here what Paul wanted to point out is, you may understand the Word of God, but are you applying the teaching of God to your daily life? He is asking you to examine yourself. It might be worth replacing the word "Jew" with "Christian" and reading those verses again.
- The best way to examine if you are merely religious is to find out if you are actually applying the teachings of Bible to your life or not. If you are learning from Bible, but are learning only as knowledge in your mind and are not actually applying it in your daily life, it might just be self-satisfaction. Please talk to and reflect on yourself first.
- In Verse 17 -19, listed the things that the Jews were proud of. Their ethnic identity, their pride of having the law of God given to Moses, their special relationship with God that God chose them,

their moral superiority in knowing God's teachings, and their pride in having and being able to teach the truth that other Gentiles did not see.

2: 17 But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God

18 and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law;

19 and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness,

- For sure, all these teachings came from God and they are correct. However, the problem is that they were proud of it. If they were to be given salvation and eternal life merely through these teachings, after all, the religion would turn out to be death. Those people who believed in that religion, they would be overwhelmed with pride and look down on others.
- It's a shocking fact, but what Paul pointed out here applies to today's Christians too. The teachings in Bible is wonderful, however, if believers are to be blessed or saved merely through the practice of the teachings, then it is a religion. Religion cannot change the nature of sin. Religion is futile.
- After all, religion is about saving yourself. You may be able to do your best temporarily, but you will be exhausted. Temporary success produces arrogance. There will be no need for God or the Savior. And the more you try, the more furious you will be. Or, you might be disappointed and even lose your faith. Religion is futile.

2. The futility of Religious Ceremonies

- Here Paul pointed out moralistic religions not only are futile but also can dishonor God and have a bad influence on other people. Verse 23 -24.

2: 23 You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.

24 For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

- In other words, looking at the religious life of the Jews made the Gentiles around them didn't want to believe in the religion. They didn't want to be like Jews, and God's name was dishonored. What do the people around you think about Christian's way of thinking, way of life, behaviours and values?
 - It is said that non-Christians usually think Christianity as "a foreign religion", "not suitable to Japanese culture", "is full of instructions to follow". Parents want to send their children to Christian schools for better education and higher chance of success. These impressions are not bad at all, but it seems that Christianity is seen as a religion of "moralism".
- I hope that Christians and churches do not give the impression to those around them that Christianity is merely a way of life that follows religious rituals. Paul took up the symbol of Jewish identity "circumcision". Circumcision is a sign of the covenant that God gave to Abraham and his descendants. It is a practice of cutting off the foreskin of the males and was considered the most important religious rite.
- However, Paul pointed out "It would be wonderful to be circumcised and have a sense of being

God's people with God's blessing. But what is the meaning and value of circumcision unless you trust and love God, and practice the law of God?"

2: 25 For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.

- We tend to treat religious ceremonies and outward behaviours as merely routines. In other words, we tend to replace the love to God, the faith in God and the guidance by Holy Spirits with religious ceremonies and outward behaviours.
- Baptism, worship, prayer, communion, donation, and church service ... are all great things. The power of God will be revealed. But did those outward good things come from the bottom of your heart? Was your heart changed by the Gospel? Internal change in your heart is the most important thing.

2: 26 So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?

27 Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law.

28 For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.

29 But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

- Paul here talked somehow ironically. But please reflect on yourself. We understand the word of God in theory. We unconsciously proud of being morally superior to others. And we diligently follow religious practice, such as baptism, worship and church service. But is there inward life here?
 - I watched the movie "*Spotlight*" recently. The film told the story about the newspaper *Boston Globe* revealed the sexual abuse committed by the priest of a Catholic church in Boston. The priest worshiped, prayed, taught the Bible, preached, counseled and served people's needs every day. At the same time, he was committing sexually abuse. It proves that religious rites neither can save people nor can change their lives.
- For today's Christians, we could rephrase it as followings. Unbaptized believers are better than baptized unbelievers! It doesn't matter if you are outwardly Jew or not. What matters is "circumcision of your heart by the Spirit".
- What a vivid image it is! A circumcised heart is a heart softened by Holy Spirit. It means a life in which you feel close to God and always want to pray to God. It doesn't come from duty. It's an attitude that comes from the love to God and it is produced because we feel the presence, closeness, and greatness of God.
- People with religious hearts also worship and pray. They feel joy and excitement through prayers, worships and service. But they do not feel secure about being loved, pleased, or forgiven by God. So, they feel anxious, fear, disappointed and helpless on weekdays (when it is not Sunday). Religious ceremonies and religious life can never save you.

3. The Necessity of Gospel Instead of Religion

- What should we do then? How can we overcome religious morality and formalism? According to the Bible, we need "circumcision of your heart by the Spirit" and there is hope in it. Then what on earth is that?
- Circumcision was in the first place a sign of the covenant which God gave to Abraham. God blessed Abraham, and He loved him and invited him into a close relationship. God also promised that all would be blessed through his offspring. The circumcision was a sign and a guarantee of the invisible blessing.
 - Whenever we make contract, we will sign the name or stamp the seal as a guarantee. In Biblical times, people made it clear in advance what curses and punishments they would receive if they broke their promise. That was circumcision.
 - According to Genesis 15, when God made His covenant with Abraham, He tore the animal in two, put them on both sides, and passed through the middle. It meant that if God broke this promise, He could be torn apart and killed like this animal.
- In other words, Abraham was invited into the relationship of love with God and was blessed with eternal happiness, for which he must be circumcised. If he didn't obey God and broke the covenant, he would be cut off from God like a circumcision. The life would be cut off.
- However, there is a person who received this circumcision. The Jews had been circumcised, but had fallen into a religion of moralism and formalism without obeying God. They deserved to be judged and cut off. But Jesus Christ was cut off for them.

Colossians 2: 11 In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,

12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

- We can't change our hearts. It is possible to lead a religious life, but religious morality and behaviours cannot save us. In Chapter 2 of Romans, it is pointed out that not only Jews but also all the others couldn't follow the teachings of God. If so, everyone should have been cut off.
- However, Jesus Christ was circumcised and cut off for us on the cross. By the cross of Christ, you also have been circumcised by Christ and have been forgiven and saved. Jesus Christ was cut off by God, and He was cursed for breaking the covenant.
- Therefore, when you believe and accept Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit will work on your heart and give you the circumcision by Christ. Then it no longer matters whether or not you obey the religion. It doesn't matter if you can follow the instructions in the religion. People who believe in Jesus will not be cut off, because the curse caused by breaking the covenant is already filled by Jesus' cross.
- So we can be sure that God is pleased with us and He loves us. From the heart circumcised by Christ comes the true worship by the Spirit and the truth, the close prayer and the service with joy.