

“Holiday Religion”

When I was a young boy in Tennessee, sounds of the Grand Ole Opry could be heard many Friday and Saturday nights on the radio in our home. I grew up loving that era of country music, especially the sounds of bluegrass music that were so prevalent on the Opry at that time. One of the songs that I remember was by a group called, Don Reno and Red Smiley and the Tennessee Cutups entitled, “Holiday Religion.” Regardless of how one would rate that song in the annals of artistic endeavor, the message that the song put forth still resonates over 50 years later. It issued a subtle challenge to those who professed to be Christians but would, generally speaking, only make an appearance at a local church on Christmas and Easter; thus the title “Holiday Religion.” Is obedience to scripture in every respect—including membership and regular attendance in a local church—optional?

As we begin a new series of articles, I want to focus on the New Testament book of Romans, particularly 6:1-4, which gives instruction on this topic of how Christians should seek to live, by grace, in total obedience to God. Before we get to chapter 6 let’s review the earliest chapters of Romans where the apostle Paul addresses the fact that mankind—because of the sin of Adam—is marred in sin, and has no way of coming into a right relationship with God apart from God’s willingness to condescend to us. In other words, because of our sin, we are incapable of coming to God of our own volition. Therefore, if a proper relationship is to exist, God must come to us. Beginning in 3:21 Paul begins expounding on the great truth that Christians are those who have been justified (declared righteous) by God’s free grace alone. “Justification is an act of God’s free grace wherein he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight only for the righteousness of Christ imputed (or credited) to us and received by faith alone.” (Westminster Shorter Catechism 33)

That’s the gospel! Christians have a new identity—a new standing or position in the sight of God. Justification by faith means that a sinner is brought into a right relationship with God, not on the basis of what the sinner has done or ever could do in and of themselves but by God’s free grace alone. Salvation is based, foundationally, on the active and passive obedience of Jesus Christ imputed to the account of all who trust him by faith. We have nothing to boast about (Romans 3:27). Beginning in 5:12 Paul begins contrasting the realities of Adam—the one who is responsible for sin and death coming into the world—with Jesus (the second Adam) who brings righteousness and the reign of grace. In 5:20 Paul teaches us that when the Mosaic Law was given (recorded on tablets of stone) sin increased in proportion to the written law. And when sin increased, amazingly, grace increased all the more!

Paul’s argument at this point in the text is not meant to give a full accounting of why God gave the law. There are other reasons given in scripture, e.g., 2 Corinthians 3:6-11; Galatians 3:17-25; 1 Timothy 1:8-11. Paul’s focus here in Romans 5

is that, as scholars have often noted, “...where sin abounded grace super-abounded.” As sin reigns in a state of death (apart from Jesus Christ), grace reigns in the state of righteousness (for those in Christ, by grace through faith). Beginning in chapter 6, Paul leaves the discussion of justification (our positional standing before God) and begins an important look at our sanctification (our practical growth in righteousness) in our new life in Christ.

As you might expect, the apostle Paul is a wonderful teacher. He often uses rhetoric to make his point. In this particular case, Paul anticipates questions that may arise based on the fact that he’s been teaching that grace covers all our sins and where sin increased grace abounded. “If that’s true,” the argument goes, “then why not sin more so that grace will abound more?” Paul’s response is masterful: “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (6:1-2) Paul is concerned to firmly refute any idea of those who may believe that, because of grace, it doesn’t matter how we live our lives. Paul is saying in effect, “God forbid that anyone could draw such a conclusion!”

In summary, “Holiday Religion” is just a symptom of a greater problem, i.e., living for ourselves and assuming that God will accept that.

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