

## Religious Symbols

### Romans 2:25-29

#### Introduction

In January, 2023 – NBA team - The Detroit Pistons had on their schedule a game against the Chicago Bulls – to be played in Paris, France. When the Pistons boarded their flight to go to Paris - - - Jalen Duren – their star rookie 19 – year old - - - was not there. When they took a team picture in front of the Eiffel Tower - - - again – no Duren. Where was he? Apparently, he misplaced his passport - - - and so was not able to fly internationally.

Pistons coach Dwane Casey gave an explanation about the passport to the media:

**Dwane Casey: 'He had it and left it in a car that he put in the shop . . . It is a learning experience as well as part of basketball and a part of life, and understanding how important passports are.'**

Jalen was a member of the team / employed by the Detroit Pistons. He had the uniform. He had great ability and star power - - - but none of that was enough - - - to allow him to get on the plane and fly to Paris.

There was one credential he needed - - - and he left it in the car!

In our passage of Scripture this morning - - - Paul is showing the Jew the utter necessity of the gospel for their acceptance before God

They have a lot of religious credentials in their hand – that they can pull out

They had the Law / they had knowledge of God's moral will / they had ethnic ties going back to Abraham / they had rituals they observed – such as circumcision / the Passover / etc.

All of this says Paul - - - will not make them righteous before God

i.e. – they lack the one thing needful - - - namely faith in the crucified and risen Christ Jesus

In this section of Romans - - - Paul – in showing the Jews the utter necessity of the gospel - - - chases them down to a final card they may wish to play from their religious hand

It is the card of circumcision - - - a covenantal sign God had given to Israel - - - even before Moses - - - circumcision was the sign of the covenant God made with Abraham

Certainly - this credential - - - this religious symbol guaranteed their acceptance before God

Paul tells them it will do no such thing

**Galatians 5:6 - 'For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working thru love.'**

We are saved by grace alone thru faith alone in in Christ alone - - - not by a ritual or a symbol

Galatians 6:15 - 'For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.'

Paul says that - - - when it comes to salvation - - - there is only one door - - - and it is the door of faith in Christ Jesus

W. H. Griffith Thomas: 'If we substitute baptism and the Lord's Supper for circumcision in this passage, we see at once the solemn application it has for us today. There is a constant danger of identifying the outward sign with the inward spiritual meaning, and of thinking that the reception of the one is a guarantee of the other.'

There are symbols in religion – that point to spiritual realities

In the church – baptism and the Lord's Supper are outward symbols

Can one have these credentials in hand before God - - - 'I was baptized' – 'I partook of the Lord's Supper' - - - and still be excluded from heaven?

Yes – if the one thing needful is neglected - - - namely – faith in the crucified and risen Lord

### I. Confidence in the Symbol - vv. 25-27

Paul pursues the Jew into his last retreat - - - 'we have been circumcised!'

Don't tell us we need saving – we have circumcision – the sign of the covenant

For many Jews - - - circumcision was their passport to heaven – they put their confidence or their boast there

Rabbie Menahem: 'Our rabbis have said that no circumcised man will see hell.'

When Paul listed off his religious credentials as a Jew- - - he listed circumcision

Philippians 3:4-6 - 'although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.'

Paul says – 'I can play this card' - - - but he came to see that such things were immaterial to being acceptable before God – or being declared righteous

Philippians 3:7-9 - 'Whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.'

Paul says - - - I know where you're coming from - - - but you are greatly mistaken

Circumcision is a wrong place to put one's confidence

What we see Paul developing is a distinction between internal religion and external symbols

Can we be saved by a ritual? – or a symbol? [No]

This does not mean that symbols are without value - - it just means that we need to see them in their proper place

God was angry with Moses - - - for not circumcising his child - - - in the book of Exodus - - - before God used Moses to deliver Israel out of Egypt – [Exodus 4]

It was a sign of God's covenant with Abraham

In the church - - - a follower of Christ is told to be baptized - - - that does not mean that baptism saves - - - but it does reflect a heart that wants to do what God says [it has value in that way]

Symbols have meaning and importance -- - but it is what takes place in the heart that matters

The flag is a symbol – that stands for our nation

We show respect to the flag / stand for the national anthem - - - as a way of showing respect for country - - - to burn the flag or trample - - - is the opposite

In marriage - - - we wear wedding rings

The ring is not the marriage - - - but it is a symbol of the covenant / and the marriage vows

In fact – we might insert wedding ring for circumcision in v. 25

'Your wedding ring is of value if you are faithful to your spouse – but if you are unfaithful to your spouse - your wearing a wedding ring is as if you didn't wear one.'

Would a wife prefer a husband who wears the wedding ring but is unfaithful to her - - - versus one who is faithful to her but who doesn't wear the ring?

She would prefer the faithful one - - - and she would tell him to wear the ring! / show the world he belongs to someone

In the church – we practice a symbol – called baptism / water baptism

It is better to be an unbaptized believer than a baptized unbeliever

The thief on the cross – was saved - - - because he had faith in Christ – he never made it to baptism

Had he lived - - - he would have been instructed to get baptized

The one thing needful: faith in Christ Jesus

In Christian theology – we speak of ordinances - - - there are two ordinances in the NT church: baptism / communion – Lord's Supper

An ordinance is an outward visible symbol of inward realities and beliefs

Baptism portrays the believer's union with Christ in death, burial and resurrection - - - also portrays the washing away of sins that comes thru faith

Baptism takes on even greater significance as it can be seen as a public profession of faith - - - standing before others and saying - - - 'I believe in Jesus'

Can a person be baptized and still go to hell? [absolutely – rituals do not save]

But - - - that doesn't mean the symbol is meaningless - - it just means that inward faith is the vital thing – [it's the passport without which you don't get on the plane!]

The Lord's Supper is a visible symbol – it portrays the fact that we are saved thru Jesus giving His body up on the cross on our behalf

Thru communion – we proclaim His death till He comes

These are recognized as important symbols - - - although not a means of salvation

The signs have value and significance as they point to inward realities and beliefs

Another religious symbol – would be the cross itself

We have a cross in our sanctuary - - - crosses are on tombstones / crosses are on churches

Why?

Does the presence of a cross on a church building mean that a church meets there - - - or that God is honored there? [it might]

But – we also recognize that some of those church buildings may be used to teach rank heresy or have little to do with Jesus

*Calvin: 'Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.'*

A cross does not make a building a church – it's what takes place within [church is technically the people of God / *εκκλησία*] - - a church is a gathering of believers - - assembled for worship

Basically – if a church does not preach the Word or observe the ordinances – it's not a church

That doesn't mean that the symbol of the cross is meaningless - - - it comes down to the heart of the worshiper / the faith of the individual

We sometimes see the significance of symbols - - - in how those hostile to the faith treat them

When a Muslim nation would take over a country - - - they would remove images of the cross from churches / deface them - - and change buildings into mosques / replace symbols with the moon and crescent or Arabic verses

Michael Green makes this statement about the symbol of Christian baptism

He compares baptism to being like a badge or a patch one wears on one's shirt

Can someone steal an officer's badge and pretend to be a cop? Yes  
And – he's not a real cop

But a real cop - - - needs to wear his badge to conduct his duties in public

*Michael Green: 'Baptism is the badge of membership in the Christian church. This is not always obvious in traditionally Christian lands where there is a lot of nominalism, where baptism is the socially acceptable thing, and where it is often performed in semi-private. But we get much nearer to the meaning of baptism when we go into a Jewish or Muslim society, and see what baptism means there.'*

*'It is extremely costly, and often involves the expulsion of a newly baptized person from home and country. Sometimes the family holds a funeral service,*

to show that the baptized person no longer belongs to them in any way. He is to all intents and purposes, dead. This extreme reaction does not take place if the person is a covert [or secret] believer, but only if he or she is baptized. For baptism is rightly seen to be the point of no return.'

Strong reactions are made in response to symbols - - - but the Scriptures remind us not to confuse the symbols with the inward realities

## II. Inward Religion - vv. 28-29

Here Paul points to the idea of inward religion – as opposed to reliance upon external symbols only

Inward circumcision is seen as an image of the new birth in the Christian faith

Colossians 2:11 - 'in Him you also were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ.'

True religion is that which is inward / of the heart

That is what Paul means when he refers to the true Jew - -- one who has inward faith / one who is acceptable to God – thru faith

Charles Hodge: 'Whenever true religion declines, the disposition to lay undue stress on external rites is increased.'

William Burkitt: 'Men are very prone to rest upon church-privileges and external performances, as evidences of divine favor, yet they are no testimonies or signs of the truth of grace. It is holiness of heart and life, the communion with God, in the exercise of faith and love, which testifies to the fulness of saving grace.'

I was baptized when I was twelve – for the first time - - - I later came to see that there was no chance that I was a genuine Christian thru my teen years - - - I got baptized again when I was 20 – because I believed that baptism is a sign of present faith and commitment - - - it's a symbol that points to inward realities - - - and is essentially meaningless if one does not have faith

Some might be surprised to hear these words from John Calvin

Calvin: 'Whether the person being baptized should be wholly immersed, and whether thrice or once, whether he should only be sprinkled . . . these details are of no importance . . . yet the word *baptize* means to immerse, it is clear that the rite of immersion was observed in the ancient church.' [Institutes, p. 1320]

Calvin – while he practiced infant baptism - - - he was very clear that if a person never comes to faith in Jesus - - - their baptism did nothing for them – but to get them a little wet

Being a genuine Christian – is more than simply observing the rituals of the church

God is never fooled by symbols - - - He looks upon the heart

A Christian is someone who embraces the apostolic testimony concerning Christ - - - that Jesus – the Son of God left the glory of heaven - - - He died on a cross for sinners / rose again

MLJ: 'A Christian is not merely a member of a church. He is not merely a good man, he is not merely a man who has made a decision. A person can do all that and still not be a Christian. A Christian is one who has been created anew; and there is only one who can create . . . God. It takes the power of God to make a Christian.'

A person can be baptized and confirmed – you can do all kinds of external things – become a church member – ask Jesus into your heart

You can go forward at a public invitation of sorts  
You can write all your sins on a sheet of paper and throw it in the fire  
You can claim to have spoken in tongues!

We are to rely upon and make our boast in nothing but the Lord Jesus Christ – and His all sufficient atoning work on our behalf

Gal. 6:14 - 'But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, thru which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.'

Philip Graham Ryken: 'justification by grace alone thru faith alone, in Christ alone means boasting in the cross alone. To understand this is to understand Galatians. More than that, it is to understand the gospel.'

Our confidence is in the cross of Calvary - - - That is the one thing needful - - - the passport without which - - - no one goes to heaven

Christ crucified for sinners / risen again - - faith in Him

The signs become of use – as outward testimonies to inward faith - - - but are meaningless apart from faith

A traitor to our country can stand and salute the flag - - - just as Judas greeted Jesus in the garden with a kiss

The vital thing is the heart

**I Corinthians 1:22-24** - 'For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.'

Why is the cross offensive?

Because it says that we are so sinful someone had to die for us  
It says that we cannot save ourselves by our good works  
The cross says that Jesus paid it all

It says there is only one way to the Father – that of Jesus Christ

### **Conclusion**

After the terror attacks of 9-11 occurred - - - many Americans were confronted with the fact – that millions of people around the globe hate America - - - and we also saw up close - - - Islam's fascination with suicide missions or martyrdoms as they would prefer to call it

Many westerners puzzled over why Muslims who say they hate things like pornography / Hollywood / etc. - - - why some of the 9/11 hijackers were seen in strip clubs the night before their mission

The answer is simple – they believed that their one act of martyrdom bought them a sure ticket into heaven – all expenses paid by themselves

i.e. – they were glorying in their one act of martyrdom - - - it would save them / cover over any sin

Man's way of salvation – I make myself worthy of heaven – thru something I do

God's way is that He provides our salvation thru Christ

He makes us new creatures in Christ – thru faith in Him

**II Corinthians 5:17** - 'Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold new things have come.'

Lord's Table