

Explore the Bible: Insufficient

February 26, 2020

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for March 15 focuses on Romans 2:17-29.*

Like a precious family memento in an overfilled attic, the meaning of this text involves digging through whole stacks of religious tradition in order to bring it into full sight. As Baptists, most of us have such little familiarity with ancient or modern Jewish religious practices that it's easy to dismiss biblical references to them as insignificant to the modern reader or overlook their deeper meaning. Yet, we do so at our own spiritual peril.

Circumcision was a common practice in the days of Jesus' earthly sojourn and Paul's as well. It involved removing the foreskin of the male genitalia and was taken very seriously as a religious act.

Circumcision was a tradition that continues to this day. In some countries, it has no religious meaning whatsoever and is practiced only as a means of improving one's physical sanitation. In religious traditions, it is meant to symbolize devotion to God. It is practiced not only in Judaism, but also in Islam and the Christian Orthodox Church—as well as other Christian communities around the world—as a religious rite of passage from childhood to adulthood.

Symbol and substance

Suffice it to say that circumcision, to the Jewish religious community, signified one as a person of faith. Unfortunately, as with many religious traditions, symbol became substance so that the true meaning of it was lost. And, like so many traditions, it was practiced too often to represent a spiritual substance that was void in some. Its deeper meaning was lost in

the moral shuffle until it no longer represented anything of true substance.

A good example of this we might more likely understand would be the practice of tithing. For some, tithing is a deeply spiritual exercise and represents absolute faith in God's provision. It's too easy, over time, simply to cut the check without celebrating its worshipful meaning. It can even become, in the mind of some, an instrument intended to manipulate God into doing our bidding.

Over the years as a pastor, I made a habit of faithfully showing up at any local café or restaurant where the men of the community gathered for coffee in the morning. It was one way of getting connected to the community outside of the congregation I served and also served to help guide my understanding of what a larger community of people were thinking. It was a self-imposed tradition that I came to value deeply.

At one coffee table, an older man showed up for coffee regularly. He always made certain that everyone knew of his close relationship with his pastor who served one of the largest congregations in town, claiming to breakfast with him once weekly. He wore his relationship with his church and his pastor like a medal.

One day, a white man himself, he made a comment at the crowded table about the then-current president of the United States that included a terribly demeaning and unspeakable pejorative. I didn't make a comment of any kind, though I now wish I had. I couldn't help but take note of how contradictory his language was from the level of spiritual influence he claimed was his. Sad, but true, too many of us are guilty of doing something similar in any given number of circumstances.

A life of integrity

At a minimum, in this text, the Apostle Paul is calling on all who would read his words to live more thoughtfully and reflectively so that there is less and less distance between the faith we claim and the way of life we actually engage.

A life of integrity is a one that seeks to “integrate” all points of oneself, merging them into one. The distance between who we claim to be and how we actually live, or how much we claim to trust God and how much we actually trust God, is daily decreased so there is no daylight between the two. The letter of James is written along very similar lines and is clearly seen in the words, “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:17, NIV).

The authenticity of both our expressed faith and our deeds decreases in direct proportion to the increase of distance between the two. Integrity is not a character trait as much as it is representative of a life disciplined by daily, honest and sincere thoughtfulness about the essential connection between what we say and what we do.

An old, not-so-funny, joke still makes the rounds occasionally. It reports an older woman interrupting her husband who is relaxed in a recliner and reading the newspaper. She is having difficulty getting his attention. She repeatedly asks, “Do you love me?” Finally, after several times of no response, she asks again. Irritated, her husband finally answers: “When we got married, I told you I loved you. If that ever changes, I’ll let you know.”

If we updated our faith confession to God or others, what is it we might have to confess in order to do so?

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