

## **Romans Series Seven**

### **Duffle Bag Religion**

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**Romans 2:17-21;Ex. 19:5-6;33:1-4, 12-13;Jn 7:37-38;Acts 2:47**

In Jesus's day, one of the major ways to build a spiritual life was to fill your duffle bag with all the proper stuff-good deeds, special accomplishments, a good pedigree. It always boiled down to what you do. Romans 2:17 says that if you call yourself a Jew, if you rely on the law, such as good works, a.k.a. the 'duffle bag,' brag about your relationship to God. Then in Romans 2:21, Paul says "...you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself?" Basically, Paul is saying, "I have got a problem with you. For people who know so much and try so hard, you should know better. You are turning my scripture and my community into a 'duffle bag' religion." 'Duffle bag' religion is just a collection of good works, not a relationship.

A couple of days ago I was playing "Polly Pockets." Do not worry. I was not playing by myself. My daughter, Colette asked me to join her. How many of you have played with Polly Pockets? Colette has been teaching me that Polly Pockets is about the accessories. You have to get the right shoes with the right purse and hat. We played Polly Pockets for 40 minutes and the only thing we did was accessorize. There were no fights or wrestling matches between Ballerina Polly and Beach Day Polly. There were no chase scenes. Polly has a car, but she does not drive it. She just stands next to it. We had to find a hat that matched the color of the car.

Here is the problem with 'duffle bag' religion. It is all about the accessories. It is all about image management. Friends, image management with Polly Pockets is a fine thing. Image management with our spiritual lives is deadly. In Romans 2, Paul is saying, "You have made your entire spiritual life all about the accessories." For example, they say, "I am related to the line of David. I know the law. I am ceremonially clean. I make the right sacrifices." We do this in our day as well, just with different things. We brag about the movies that we refuse to see. We brag about how often we go to church. We brag about the people we will not hang around. We brag about how much scripture we have memorized. It is like saying, "Look at the certain scandalous sins I have avoided or at least have kept secret." Sometimes we make our spiritual lives about the things we get from God. We think God should heal us. We want a better job or spouse. We think we should not have problems with our children. We complain that life is too hard. The issue Paul is presenting to us is a simple one. You can have 'duffle bag' religion and make it all about the accessories, all about your image, and all the things you want. Or, we can pursue an authentic love relationship with God where our heart is driven first to know God and please God. Think of the marriages of today. Few people think of knowing and pleasing our partner as a high value.

### **Historical Background**

After the Israelites had been in the desert for a while they had seen a lot. They had watched God deliver them out of Egypt. They watched the Red Sea split, water spring from a rock, manna fall from the sky. God makes this remarkable promise going back to the time of Abraham. He reiterates this promise, reminding every generation of His heart's desire to have a relationship with them. In Exodus 19:5b-6, God tells them, if you'll follow Me, if you will really give yourself over to a (covenant), a relationship with Me, I will make myself open and vulnerable to you. "...you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine,<sup>6</sup> you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." But they struggle. They form their own brand of "duffle bag" religion. They see God as a kind of "sugar daddy" in the heavens. If

we do certain things, God should do things for us. They make their spiritual lives all about them, their image, their needs, their way.

Read Exodus 33:1-3a. <sup>1</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, "Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt, and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants.' <sup>2</sup> I will send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. <sup>3</sup> Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey..." Pause for a moment. This is an amazing offer. God is saying, "Go!" There is no more waiting, no more lessons. Then, in Exodus 33:3b, "...but I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way." Think about that. God is offering them almost everything they wanted, everything for which they had asked. He basically says, "You will be free of Egypt-no more slavery. I will send an angel. You will not get lost. You will own the land. You will have milk and honey. Your material needs will be met." Then He says, "Just one thing, though. You will not have Me. I will not go with you!" That means no more lessons of trust as in parting water or Mount Sinai. There will be no more convicting people of sin until they are broken. There will be no more passionate forgiveness that melts your heart. No times of worship that fill your heart until you think it will just burst. God tells them, You can become a strong, proud nation, and be successful in all you do. All of your needs will be met, but you will not have me.

This becomes a striking moment of clarity for the Israelites. In this moment, they realize the deepest longing of their soul is to know God, to really know God above all else. "When the people heard these distressing words, they began to mourn and no one put on any ornaments." (Exodus 33:4) At one point, Moses speaks for the people and says, "We do not want to go. If You do not go, do not send us. The people refuse to go." (Exodus 33:15) If you put it all on a scale-everything you ever wanted on one side and a relationship with God on the other side-what would you choose? They said, "God!"

One of the primary needs for followers of God is to encounter the living God. Friends, an interesting thing happens every single Sunday. People show up at church all over the world. After church, some people go home having been in the presence of the living God. They laughed or wept. They were broken or healed. Other people go home, and all they did was simply sit in a service.

Read Exodus 33:12-13. "Moses said to the LORD, "You have been telling me, 'Lead these people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, 'I know you by name and you have found favor with me.' <sup>13</sup> If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people." God hears this, and says, I'll go with you. I believe that God deeply desires a relationship with His people. He desires to love and be loved. This time, the Israelites get it right. They will not regret this decision. This will do more for their souls than anything else in the world.

God asks, "Will you love me more than you love your own image? Will you love me more than the things I give you? Will you love me more than having it your way? Will you love me more than protecting your rights? Will you love me above all else in this world? Will you love me?"

### Paul's Anger

Paul is angry because the religious leaders have put 'duffle bag' religion above seeking the very presence of God. Friends, this is our issue as well. It is so easy for us to seek God's blessing more than God, Himself. We seek to protect our own image or to protect our own preferences and rights.

Read John 7:37-38. Jesus stood and said in a loud voice...Streams of living water...There is a magnificent life of love, joy, and peace described in Scripture. It describes a life of knowing and interacting

with God but then there is the reality of what we face every single day. How do we close this gap? This is a church that, at its core, wants to see people close the gap to experience that which really is a relationship with God. This journey begins with receiving Christ into your heart. So if you have just taken this step, you are not alone.

I have the pleasure of saying to all new Christians that they are never going to be alone again. They received more than just Christ in their heart. They now belong to a family. Even if they have to face death, cancer, problems at work, heartbreak, or disillusionment, they are not alone. They do not have to go it alone because they belong to this family called Casas.

### Church

Leading people to Christ and is so important for us. There is something deeply, inherently wrong in a church that is no longer leading people to Christ. “<sup>47</sup>...praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” (Act 2:47) This is something fundamental about a healthy church. Jesus said we are to be a City on a Hill and A Light. Friends, this past month you have been a city on a hill. God was using you. There are many people who have become Christians and are filled with a new kind of joy. Continue praying that God will use this community in amazing ways.