



Getting Righteousness the Right Way

Lesson 13 | Romans 9:30-10:21

Martin Luther was tortured by the question of how he could stand before a holy God. His conscience gave him no relief. As a Catholic he would spend hours in confession going over every possible sin he could think of, until eventually his fellow priests dreaded being the unlucky man who had to listen to him. Luther felt strongly how completely inadequate his own righteousness was. This is why when he finally realized that God's righteousness was a free gift and not something he had to work for on his own, he felt an overwhelming sense of relief and joy.

Yet many people think the exact opposite as Luther. Most people think they can be good enough to get to heaven. Rather than feeling the depth of their sin, they excuse and overlook it, thinking that God must feel quite lucky that they like Him. They try to do what is good, generally, but they aren't too bothered if they fall short. Most people think the good things they do make them righteous before God.

Why do you think most people don't feel more strongly the weight of their sin before God?

How can we as believers point out to people their sin and their need for Christ?

This way of thinking is nothing new. In Romans 9:30-10:21, we see that Israel also thought they could be righteous by following the law. Paul is continuing to defend the way God has dealt with Israel, this time by trying to help young Christians wrap their minds around how it is that the Jewish Messiah would be rejected by the Jews. In this lesson we are looking at the third of five reasons why God's current dealings with Israel don't contradict His promises in His Word. We see that God's rejection of Israel at the current moment is fair because they have not sought God's righteousness by faith, which is the way God always intended for His people to be righteous.

Israel Sought Righteousness by the Law and Not by Faith (9:30-10:13)

Paul had just finished arguing that Israel was being passed over because God has sovereignly chosen to show mercy to the Gentiles and not to Israel. Yet while it is true that God has the right to show mercy to whomever He wants, it's also true that from a human perspective Israel had rejected faith, God's way for people to be righteous.

Israel Made a Faulty Attempt at Righteousness (9:30-33)

If you were living in the first century and saw the situation of the church after Christ, it would look quite odd. The Jewish people – who were most concerned to be righteous by keeping the law – were unable to do so and now stand before God unrighteous and condemned. But the Gentiles, who didn't have the law

and went about life ignoring what God thought or wanted, have somehow ended up being righteous. How is this the case? Because the Jews tried as hard as they could to be righteous, but they did it the wrong way. Trying hard will never work if you try the wrong way. You can try as hard as you want to qualify for the 400-yard sprint in the Olympics, but if your training consists of lifting weights you will never make it. Israel tried hard to follow the law, but following the law was not ultimately what God was looking for. He was looking for faith.

Why do people continue to try to do good even after being told that they can never be good enough and instead need to believe God?

Paul quotes a passage from Isaiah to make drive this point home even further: the Jews stumbled over Jesus and the message of the cross (cf 1 Corinthians 1:22-24). They did not want to come to God by faith in Christ. Such a message was offensive to them and not what they expected or wanted from God because they wanted to do it on their own.

Why do people today find the message of Christianity offensive?

Israel Had a Faulty Understanding of the Law (10:1-8)

Two things about this passage leave some commentators scratching their head. First, there is the question of what exactly Paul means by saying that “Christ is the end of the law.” (10:4) Does the Greek word used here (*telos*) mean Jesus ended the law, so that after Him the law was done away with? Or does it mean He was the goal of the law, in that the law pointed toward and led up to Him? Probably both ideas are true – the purpose and goal of the law was to point to Jesus, and now that He has come the need to keep the Mosaic law has passed. Now, we no longer must keep the Old Testament law, although we must follow the instructions of the New Testament (cf 1 Corinthians 9:21). Israel misunderstood the law because they failed to realize that the law was meant to point people to Jesus (Galatians 3:24), not be a way of salvation.

How does the Old Testament law (Genesis through Deuteronomy and especially the commands and instructions in those books) point to Jesus?

But to further argue his point Paul quotes two Old Testament passages that lead to the second confusing issue in this passage: how is Paul interpreting these verses? He quotes Leviticus 18:5 and Deuteronomy 30:11-14,¹ yet in doing so he seems to argue these passages contradict and some would argue he misunderstands Deuteronomy 30. So is Paul pitting Scripture against Scripture, as if Moses was right when he wrote Deuteronomy but wrong when he wrote Leviticus? No, rather, Paul is reviewing what he has already said – the Old Testament law would lead to life if someone could keep it, but no one can (cf Romans 7:9-13). But then he uses the words of Deuteronomy to make the point that God’s message of salvation is not something far off that can never be reached. In Deuteronomy 30, Moses had been telling

¹ The second quotation begins with the phrase “say not in thine heart,” which is a brief snippet that comes from a third passage – Deuteronomy 9:4. This is interesting because the rest of the verse is a warning against Israel’s self-righteousness “Speak not thou in thine heart, after that the LORD thy God hath cast them out from before thee, saying, For my righteousness the LORD hath brought me in to possess this land: but for the wickedness of these nations the LORD doth drive them out from before thee. 5 Not for thy righteousness, or for the uprightness of thine heart, dost thou go to possess their land: but for the wickedness of these nations the LORD thy God doth drive them out from before thee, and that he may perform the word which the LORD sware unto thy fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

the Israelites that God's laws were not hidden or impossible to figure out. No, God had brought them the message of how He wanted them to live and made it abundantly clear. Similarly, in the new dispensation of grace, Paul is arguing that God has made the gospel message very clear: believe in Jesus and you will be saved.

In what ways does Satan try to make salvation something more complicated and difficult than it needs to be?

How important is it to be careful about the doctrine of salvation, and in what ways could a legitimate concern over right doctrine become a matter of unnecessary confusion?

Israel Rejected the Proper Way of Righteousness (10:9-13)

These verses are some of the most well-known in all of Scripture. They describe how it is that a person is able to be saved from God's coming wrath. Building on his quotation from Deuteronomy 30, Paul takes the key themes of heart and mouth and expands on them by saying that people are saved by confessing with their mouth the Lord Jesus and believing in their heart God raised Him from the dead. This the only way of salvation. As Paul reminds us, this is the way for both Jews and Gentiles, for all must come in faith to receive the righteousness that God offers. The section ends, not surprisingly, with a quotation from the Old Testament that whoever (for Paul meaning either Jew or Gentile) calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Why do you think the emphasis on both the heart and the mouth? How do these relate in salvation?

Why does Paul say that we need to believe Jesus is risen from the dead?

How can these verses be a comfort to those who struggle with assurance of their salvation?

Israel Rejected the Gospel Message of Righteousness by Faith (10:14-21)

Israel thought they could attain righteousness by their own careful keeping of the law. They were wrong, but they gave it their best shot. Maybe they didn't know any better. Maybe they just didn't realize that their righteousness wasn't good enough. Paul knows this isn't the case, so he shows God made sure the message got to Israel that they were wrong and told them how they could get it right.

The Necessity of a Gospel Preacher (10:14-17)

So if the message of the gospel is near and must be believed, then it must first be heard. If it must be heard, someone must share the good news. And in order for someone to share the good news, they must first be sent. Once again Paul begins quoting the Old Testament to show that what is happening now in Christ is consistent with how God has always acted. Here he quotes from Isaiah 52:7, where the prophet talks about the good news of freedom from Babylon. Now, the good news is better yet! People have been freed from the power of sin and death! What incredible news!

Why do we sometimes fear to share the incredible good news of freedom and salvation from sin to those around us?

This is often used as a key verse for missions, and on one hand that is good but we have to realize that Paul's main point here is not that we need to send out missionaries. His main point is actually that to believe people need to hear the message, but the Jews have heard the message and are responsible for not believing! Yet, we can apply this passage by recognizing that what Paul says here means that we need

to send missionaries to those who have yet to hear. In fact, we know that this was a great burden of Paul himself (Romans 15:22-25). If people are going to respond to the gospel, they need to at least hear the gospel message.

How can we be gospel preachers and take the good news to those who need to hear?

Paul includes another quotation from the Old Testament that is a little bit unsettling (10:16). Pulling once again from Isaiah (53:1), he points out that even during Isaiah's time the good news of God's salvation was rejected. Sadly, it wasn't just the Israelites of Isaiah's day who rejected the good news. Paul sees history repeating itself as the Israel once again rejects God's message.

Israel's Rejection of Gospel Preachers (10:18-21)

Israel didn't believe the gospel message (10:16). Was this because they didn't hear? No, the testimony of Christ went out clearly to all the Jews (10:18). Borrowing language from Psalm 19,² Paul argues that the gospel message had gone out to the Jewish people through sent messengers (like himself), and they had heard. Maybe they didn't accept the gospel message because they just really didn't understand? No, Paul uses two further Old Testament passages to make the argument that the problem is not ignorance. This time he quotes from Deuteronomy 32:21 and Isaiah 65:1-2, showing that God's message is being accepted and embraced by the Gentiles. If those who were not seeking God can respond in faith, certainly God's own people can. Paul will build on this more later, when he argues that God is going to use the Gentile acceptance of the gospel to eventually bring Israel to faith (Romans 11:11-32).

How can the faith of those who wouldn't be expected to show faith be an example to those who should be showing faith but aren't?

Why do you think it is that those on the outside showed faith and received salvation, but God's own people missed out? What warning does this have for the present day church?

Paul's words are here directed against a situation that doesn't strike us as odd anymore – the gospel has been accepted by the nations but has been rejected by the God's own nation, Israel. The people of God had rejected the Messiah sent by God, and this happened because they sought to gain their own righteousness by following God's law rather than trusting in simple faith. They should have known better, because God told them through messengers and prophets what He was doing and yet they ignored His message. Like their fathers before them, they rejected the Word of God to them, while paradoxically holding onto the very Word that testified to the exciting new work God was doing.

Yet Paul's words here strike close to home if we listen attentively and think carefully about our own time. Many people sitting in the pews, like the Jews of Paul's day, think that what God is really looking for is that they do or don't do certain things. Even in gospel preaching churches, many think their eternal destiny

² Some have wondered once again if Paul misinterpreted Psalm 19 here, since that psalm is about the testimony of God in creation going out to everyone, regardless of location or language. Yet this assumes a fairly low view of Paul's intelligence. Paul was a trained Jewish teacher and would have known what Psalm 19 was about. Rather, Paul is borrowing a well-known line from a famous song to express a similar idea. It would be like someone today saying "I once was lost, but now am found" when they realize what God's plan for the next phase of their life is after a period of confusion, even if those words originally meant that someone was saved.

depends on their own works, and not on God's righteousness provided to all those who in faith confess Jesus. Others find themselves tied into knots trying to figure out if they are "really saved" when the simple promise of Romans 10:13 stands – all who call on Christ will be saved. Paul's message here arguing for God's faithfulness to what He has promised in the Old Testament and the necessity of faith stands as a testimony to us that we must trust in Christ and Christ alone for our salvation. Salvation isn't about doing everything right, it's about trusting Jesus. And that is a distinction is as badly needed in our own time as it was in Paul's.