

## **Two kinds of righteousness, one near the other impossibly far.**

Reading: Deuteronomy 30: 11-20, Text: Romans 10:1-13

In Romans 10 we find Paul continuing his discussion about his countrymen the Jews, this time going from the past to the present. In chapter 9 he discusses events in Israel's past mentioning Isaac, Jacob and the Exodus to explain the doctrine of election. Not all Israel are Israel and the true Israel are those chosen by God who consequently trust in God's promises, and that those who believe in him will not be disappointed.

Here in chapter 10 Paul turns to the present in the hope that they will hear and believe the gospel. We find in verse 1 that it was Paul's heart's desire and prayer that his countrymen the Jews might yet be saved.

Paul being a Jew and a former Pharisee knew what he was saved from. From what we know about Paul's history he was a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, zealous for the truth a persecutor of Christians. Paul felt it was his God given duty to help exterminate this heretical movement who were upsetting his religion, until God stopped Paul on the road to Damascus.

Then he saw the light and did a complete about face. He looked back on his life and realised he was a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent aggressor and yet he was shown mercy because he acted in ignorance.

So here its Paul's deep desire and prayer that his countrymen who also acted in ignorance, who have a similar zeal for God but not according to knowledge, might yet be saved. This is his hope. And so again he explains the way of salvation for them by focusing the subject of righteousness. Paul's explanation is an important one for the church in every age because of the tendency to confuse the subject of righteousness and slip back, often unwittingly into a works righteousness. So let's have another look at this subject today.

### **First of all a righteousness that is by the law**

Paul's concern for the Jews here had to do with their misguided zeal. He understands it because he was like that himself. And when it comes to matters of faith people can be very zealous and sincere and very committed to a position. But if their zeal is misguided than it become fanaticism which can be very dangerous and divisive.

We can differentiate godly zeal from ungodly zeal by asking the following questions about it. Does the person's zeal produce self-righteousness or humility? Is it censorious? Does it accuse, denounce and condemn or is the zeal loving? Does it lead to self-praise or self-denial? Does it show itself in loud talking and boasting, or in prayer and effort? Good things to think about. It's good to be zealous providing zeal is godly.

In the case of the Jews, Paul says they were ignorant of God's righteousness and sought to establish their own. Some of that had to do with their endeavours to keep the Mosaic law; not just ceremonial but also the moral law.

I mention the ceremonial law because of the influence of some who follow the New Perspective on Paul put forward by Messrs Sanders and Dunn, and more recently taken up by a group in the United States called Federal Vision. They say that the Jews were right to see righteousness as obedience to the law. They've given it a nice sounding name, "Covenantal Nomism" which means covenant law-keeping. They say that it applies to Christians today

and that their view agrees with Paul's teaching. What Paul objected to they say was the continuation of circumcision, Sabbath observance, dietary regulations and ritual purity which was seen as nationalistic and that it excludes the Gentiles. What Paul was really objecting to was the Jews claiming a monopoly on covenant righteousness.

And so, where Paul wrote "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness", that statement according to the New Perspective movement is all about ceremonial righteousness and not moral righteousness.

Christ is the end of the ceremonial law but not the moral law.

After all, Paul quotes Moses in verse 5 where it says "that the man practicing righteousness based on the law shall live by that righteousness?" "As far as the New Perspective people are concerned that simply proves their position that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ and justified by keeping the law.

Well, it is tempting to think that your obedience can somehow contribute to your salvation and there are many shades of it and it is widespread among all religions including Christianity. For example there's a fine line between using the law as a way of gaining righteousness or using the law as a rule of gratitude. We can lapse from what we know is the right use of the law which is that it shows us our sin, drives us to Christ and then becomes a rule of gratitude to the wrong use of the law such as using it to look righteous. There is a name for that. It's called legalism.

But it is clear that Paul's concern for his countrymen the Jews was that they had not yet grasped the truth about the law and righteousness. It wasn't Abraham's stature or exemplary behaviour that made him righteous. It was his faith. Genesis 15:6 "Abraham believed in the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness." Similarly any attempt to maintain righteousness through keeping the law is doomed to failure. As Isaiah puts it ALL our righteous acts are like filthy rags in God's sight.

The only way we can be righteous in God's sight is by receiving righteousness as a free gift through faith in Jesus Christ.

Notice that it says in verse 4 "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." The Greek word for end is *telos* which means fulfil. So Christ is the fulfilment of the law for righteousness. He did what we can't do fulfill all the requirements of the law. Therefore the righteousness which Christ provided for our justification is one which fully satisfies God's requirements and that really is the end of the matter. We find our righteousness by faith in Christ and not by our flawed attempts at keeping the law.

## **2. That leads to the second point the righteousness that is by faith.**

Verse 6 and 7 say "the righteousness that is by faith says "do not say in your heart who will ascend into heaven (that is to bring Christ down) or who will descend into the abyss (that is to bring Christ up from the dead) . These words are an illusion to Deuteronomy 30:12-14 where Moses was encouraging the Israelites in the way of obedience. Where Moses said "It is not in heaven that you should say who will go up to heaven for us to get it"... And further on, "Nor is it beyond the sea that you should say who will cross the sea for us to get it." Moses was making the point that true obedience was not an impossible dream which was out

of reach but that it was near, observable, in the mouth and in the heart; that is by *faith in God*. Abraham and his spiritual descendants are justified or made righteous by faith.

Similarly “righteousness by faith in Jesus Christ is not inaccessible. Some things in life do require strenuous effort to achieve them. There’s talk now about flying people to Mars or colonising the moon something which seems to me to be extremely difficult if it is possible at all. Others immerse ourselves in the mysteries of eastern religions in order to discover truth and righteousness. For example according to Bhuddism, true righteousness can only be gained by following a rigorous lifelong 8 fold path of righteousness.

But righteousness is not an impossible dream with Jesus. No one needs to ascend into heaven to find Christ. He came down to earth and dwelt among us and was easily accessible, walking among the lost sheep of Israel, healing the sick, restoring sight, raising the dead and forgiving sinners. His zeal was never censorious, self-praising or harsh. He was always humble and always charitable,.. to the point of death, even death on the cross so that our sin could be nailed there with him and his righteousness could cover us.

And where Paul wrote “who shall descend to the depths that is to bring Christ up? Paul was responding to those who denied the resurrection of Christ and who say that Jesus bones are still in a tomb on the slopes somewhere near Jerusalem!

Paul’s answer, again alluding to Moses in Deuteronomy 30 was “the word is very near you in your mouth and in your heart” and then Paul adds, “the word of faith which we are preaching.”

This is how close Christ is to us today. This is how close salvation is. It is as close as the preached word and as close as confessing with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believing your heart that God raised Him from the dead. Do that Paul says and you will be saved, if you haven’t done that already. You don’t need to be an astronaut or a potholer or caver to do that.

Righteousness and salvation are as close as your mouth and your heart. Just look at the facts in God’s reliable all-sufficient word, confess it and believe it.

Confessing and believing go hand in hand as Paul points out in the next verse. Confession without faith in the heart would be vain. Likewise a claim to have faith but a refusal to confess that faith would leave one wondering is there really any faith at all? I guess it’s possible, we can never judge a book by its cover. But Jesus did say to his disciples in Matthew 10:22, “everyone who confesses me before men I will also confess him before my Father in heaven. And again in Luke 12:8 “anyone who confesses me before men, the Son of Man shall confess him before the angels in heaven.”

There are times in life when we have to make simple declarations for example when we are required by the crown to make statutory declarations, or when we get married and make our marriage vows. We say before God and witnesses, “I do!” So too as Christians we must publically open our mouths and say Jesus is Lord. Righteousness is as near as the simple confession Jesus is Lord.”, along with faith in the heart.

The Greek word for believe is *Pisteuo*, which means to put your personal trust and confidence in in whoever you believe in. It must come from the heart. When Paul speaks about the heart he is speaking about the inner core of our being about the mind and soul. According to Roman 10: 9, what we must trust and put our confidence in with mind and soul

in is the fact the God raised Jesus from the dead. From the depths of my being I trust that God raised Jesus from the dead. We can make mistakes about theology and not be perfectly orthodox in every way. But the denial of the resurrection of Christ is really an intolerable error. You cannot be saved if you do not believe in the resurrection of Christ.

And so clearly the need for a credible confession of faith is important and a Christian who has true faith in the heart would know that. Many in the persecuted church know that. In the recent editorial of the Voice for the Martyrs magazine there is a section on the Christians in Ethiopia who have endured a long history of persecution. Those who confess Christ today say they are proud of their fellow Ethiopians who gave their lives for the risen Christ. (I doubt anyone would do the same for a dead Christ!) One of the pastors there said that that though he would be afraid to be at the mercy of Islamic State militants, with God's help he would do the same confess Jesus. I am a Christian he said, my life belongs to God.

The word is near us. We have ready access to the means of grace in the preaching and sacraments. We can stand together and confess with our mouths the risen Christ with the songs we sing and the creeds we recite and be clothed in his righteousness by believing with the heart.

Finally we see the result of confessing and believing in the last three verses of our text which says, "For the scripture says whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed for there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on him, for whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Paul needed to repeat the fact that there is *no distinction* because many Jews refused to accept that. They regarded themselves as the chosen people. Paul is saying that those days have passed. The Messiah had come it was time for the fulfilment of prophecy. Paul quoted the prophet Isaiah, "*whoever* believes in him will not be disappointed." And then there's Joel, "*whoever* calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Whoever! Jew or Greek male or female slave or free. Christ readily welcomes all who call on Him and grants all the priceless riches of salvation including forgiveness of sins and eternal life to those who do. And according to 1 Corinthians 2:9 we can hardly begin to imagine the things God has prepared for us in eternity.

All it takes is to call on him, to trust in him and to believe that he is God's answer to our problem of sin and to confess him. The result is righteousness and eternal life.

The only alternative a righteousness by the law, but that is impossibly far. That is which is as likely to achieve as it is to build a ladder to climb up in to heaven on it.

But Christ is the end of the law, and therefore salvation and righteousness is very near us. It's as close as your confession, Jesus is Lord and your faith in our risen Savior,

Amen