

Romans: The Mystery of Righteousness (part 4 of 8)

Whoever Calls Upon the Name of the Lord Will be Saved

Romans 9:30-10:13

Mark Vroegop

³⁰ What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith;³¹ but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. ³² Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone,³³ as it is written, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."¹ Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. ² For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. ³ For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. ⁴ For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. ⁵ For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. ⁶ But the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down)⁷ "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸ But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);⁹ because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame."¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. ¹³ For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Romans 9:30–10:13 (ESV)

What would you say or what verses would you quote if you only had thirty seconds to share the central message of the Bible with someone? Even if you are not a Christian or do not know the Bible, how would you answer that question? What is the fundamental message or the invitation that Christianity is all about?

There are a number of really good passages throughout the Bible that you could quote, but there are two verses in our text today that should make the list. If I'm looking to summarize the message of the Bible and urgently call someone to become a Christian, I'd quote Romans 10:9-10;

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved (Romans 10:9-10)

These verses capture the essence and the beauty of what makes grace amazing. They identify the central difference between Christianity and all the other religions of the world. And they lay the foundation for how a person is saved or made righteous.

The Mystery of Righteousness Continued

Our text today continues the theme of the mystery of righteousness, but it looks at this mystery through the broad and sweeping lens of God's offer of salvation to "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord" (Rom 10:13). This tone is different but not contradictory to what we learned in Romans 9. It is another side of the same coin.

Previously we looked at the problem of Israel's unbelief in light of the promises of God. There were three key questions:

1. Has the word of God failed since the promises to Israel have not come to pass? (9:6)
2. Is there injustice on God's part because of election? (9:14)
3. Why does God still find fault if mercy depends on God and not on us? (9:19)

Hopefully you will remember that the point of Romans 9 was to demonstrate that God's promises to Israel have temporarily been fulfilled through a chosen remnant so that God's promises rest entirely on God's sovereignty. In other words, God is working out his plan to show His power and glory through both mercy and judgment (9:17-18).

The way in which He dealt with Israel is a microcosm of His sovereign purposes. God's relationship with His chosen people becomes a vivid picture of who He is as God.

But there is another side of this picture. The focus of Romans 9 is mainly God and what He does. Romans 10-11 shifts the focus to include the practical outworking of grace in the lives of people. In other words Romans 9 says, "...it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy" (Rom 9:16), and Romans 10 says, "...with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved" (Rom 10:10). Both are equally true.

The focus shifts from what God does in salvation to what human beings are called to do. Central to this shift is Israel's failure to understand what real righteousness is and how it is acquired. Once again Israel becomes a microcosm of the God's plan for redemption, and in 9:30-10:13 we see the failure of Israel to embrace God's righteousness and the surprising extension of grace to the Gentiles.

Ironically, the people most likely to achieve righteousness missed it, and the most unlikely people (the Gentiles) received it. How did that happen? And what does it tell us about God's grace?

Roadblocks to Righteousness

The first section of our text, 9:30-10:4, identifies the problem of Israel's failure when it came to achieving God's righteousness. Despite having the law of God and the blessings connected with being rescued from slavery, the nation of Israel missed God's righteousness. They had so many things at their disposal, and yet, for the most part, the nation had not embraced true righteousness.

Verses 30-31 set up the surprising reality and the stunning contrast:

³⁰ *What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith;* ³¹ *but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Romans 9:30–31 (ESV)*

The Gentiles were not known for their righteousness, but Israel was. The Gentiles were considered “outsiders,” immoral, lawless, and depraved. They did not have a written law from God to guide their conduct. Israel, on the other hand, had the Law of God revealed to them, and her mission was to be a light to world, inviting the nations to the light of God’s glory as seen through them (see Isaiah 60:1-3). But what happened?

According to verses 30-31, Gentiles **who did not pursue righteousness** attained it but Israel **who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness** did not achieve righteousness. In a stunning irony, the people closest to the God’s righteousness missed it, and those who most would think are the furthest away received it. Why did this happen?

We get a hint in verse 30b when Paul explains what he means by righteousness. He says, “...that is a righteousness that is by faith.” The contrast between Israel and the Gentiles is between a righteousness based upon works and a righteousness that is based upon faith. In other words, Israel becomes a microcosm of a works-oriented mentality that fails to be truly reconciled to God.

The issue is clearly stated in verse 32: “...*Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone...*” (Romans 9:32). Israel, despite having the Law and the Messiah sent to them did not pursue righteousness based upon faith. They based their righteousness on their works, and they “stumbled over the stumbling stone.”

Paul uses the language of a stumbling stone in order to drive home the dividing line of faith. Verse 33 is a loose quotation of Isaiah 8:14 and 28:16, and the Old Testament message is simply that those who trust in Yahweh will find Him to be a shelter and security in the midst of judgment, but those who place their trust elsewhere will face judgment.¹ Belief protects a person from judgment (“not be put to shame), and yet the object of belief is (“a stone”) is not universally accepted (“a stone of stumbling”). We know who Paul is referring to here. The stone of stumbling is none other than Jesus Christ, something Peter states unequivocally in 1 Peter 2:6-8.

In this text, the point is to simply highlight the irony of what happened in Israel as an example: the most spiritual people stumbled over the most spiritual person, and they rejected true spirituality. I hope that you hear what this text is saying, and that you heed this warning because it is most relevant to the “Sunday morning crowd.” I grew up in a Christian home, went to church every week, attend Christian schools all through my education, and I saw and felt this reality lived out. Sometimes the people closest to the truth were the furthest from it, and sometimes the spiritual culture can make unspiritual people feel spiritual. In my high school it was strangely ironic that there were kids who

¹ Schreiner, Thomas R. *Romans*. Vol. 6. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998. Print. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament.

memorized the Heidelberg Catechism during the week, and partied like pagans on the weekend. And sometimes the close proximity to spiritual things created a self-deception when it came to sinful behavior. Now don't hear me say that Christian homes or Christian schools or anything "Christian" is fundamentally bad. I'm merely highlighting that those environments, while safe from some things, are still potentially dangerous but in other, important ways. The warning from Israel is not to trust in your heritage, your upbringing, your knowledge, or your proximity to spiritual truth. Spiritualized cultures do not guarantee true spirituality. Your spiritual heritage can actually be a roadblock to righteousness. But there's more.

In Romans 10:1-4, Paul puts some further handles on the roadblocks to righteousness. After expressing his heart for the people of Israel (10:1), Paul identifies a number of specific expressions of Israel's failed righteousness. There are four of them to note here:

1. Pointless Zeal

The first thing listed here is not implicitly a bad thing, but in context, it certainly is. Paul acknowledges that the people of Israel have a zeal for God. Paul knew this on a personal level because he was a very spiritually zealous person. In Philippians 3:4-6, he says this about himself:

⁴...If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more:⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Philippians 3:4-6 (ESV)

The Jewish people stood out from the rest of the world because of their passionate commitment to purity and obedience to the Law. And yet Romans 10:2 says that this zeal was "not according to knowledge," which means that it was a zealousness that worked against them. Ironically, their zeal led them away from true righteousness not toward it. Zeal does not make a person right. In fact, it can serve to make a person even more self-deceived.

2. Willful Ignorance

In verse 3 Paul uses the word "ignorant" to refer to Israel's knowledge. Sometimes ignorant can mean that one is uneducated or unformed. That is not the meaning here, and that is why the ESV renders this Greek word as "ignorant." The people of Israel ignored the call to believe and instead they put their trust in their own righteousness. Their pursuit of their own justification eclipsed the call to believe. They were willfully ignorant.

3. Proud Self-Justification

Verse 3 continues by saying "seeking to establish their own {righteousness}." This is the essence of the problem. The Jews used the law as a means to justify themselves, to compare themselves to others, and to fill up their proud hearts that they were worthy of God's affection and love. They did what every human being does: we seek to establish why we are the exception to the rule, better than others, and verify that we are righteous. The dividing line in the gospel is over this key issue. Is righteousness something that you create by yourself and ultimately for yourself? Or is righteousness

something outside of yourself, something that must be received through trust in another, and something for which you can take no credit.

4. Rebellious Resistance

The final roadblock could be seen as a summary statement. At the end of the day, any attempt to self-justify is ultimately a refusal to submit to God's righteousness. The gospel says, "You need God's help. You need to trust in Christ." The rebellious heart says, "I'm not helpless. I'm better than others. I'm worthy of God's love."

The problem for Israel was that they used the spiritual gift of the law in a way that God never intended. They used something that was to be an expression of their relationship with God as the basis for their relationship with God. They used the law to establish their righteousness, and they missed the fact that belief in Jesus fulfills the purpose and the heart of the Law.

The Law was not the problem (see Rom. 7:7-25). The issue was how self-seeking, grace-rejecting, pride-creating, people-fearing people used the Law to squeeze grace and faith out of their life. Their observance of the Law became their confidence and their hope. Christ is the end of the Law in that people who trust in Christ cease to use the Law to justify themselves.² Jesus is the goal of the law for those who believe.

You see, an irreligious person and a religious person both have the same problem: they can trust in their works. When asked what they are counting on for their salvation, the irreligious person says, "I haven't killed anyone. I'm not as bad as a lot of people. I try to do what's right, etc." And the religious person says, "I've been a Christian all my life. I've attended church since I was a child; I was baptized as a teenager. I give generously; I'm involved in social justice work; I participate in a small group, etc." And while all of those things are good, it is the absence of Christ and one's belief in him that is a roadblock to righteousness. The irreligious is condemned by his bad deeds, and the religious person is condemned because of his bad good deeds.

And the tragic connection between them is the absence of faith in Christ. Anything else besides faith in Christ is a roadblock.

*On Christ the solid rock I stand
All other ground is sinking sand³*

Receiving Righteousness

The second subject to which now Paul turns is in regard to how righteousness is, in fact, achieved. In contrast to the way that the people of Israel pursued it, true righteousness is something that is received not earned or merited, and it is this message that the Gentiles are hearing and receiving –

² Schreiner, 548.

³ Interestingly, the initial words to the hymn "My Hope is Built" were first sung to a dying woman by Pastor Edward Mote (1797-1874). After seeing the encouragement through the song, he composed additional stanzas, and it became a part of a hymnal in 1836. It was original titled "The Immutable Basis of a Sinner's Hope."

much to everyone's surprise. Israel missed righteousness despite all her "righteousness," and the Gentiles are receiving it despite all their unrighteousness.

There are five aspects of the nature of righteousness that we need to note. These words overlap and should be seen as a beautiful constellation:

1. Faith

Paul leads with the most familiar contrast with works in the Bible: "righteousness based on faith." (v. 6) This really is the theme for the entire section. Righteousness does not come to those who work for their righteousness but to those who trust in God's gift of righteousness. True spirituality is not found in our works, but in the work of Christ. This is the great contrast that runs throughout the Bible – the difference between a works-based righteousness and a faith-based righteousness.

In verse 5, Paul quotes Leviticus 18:5 in order to start his argument. It is likely cited here because this may have been a favorite text for those who sought to establish their righteousness through the Law. Leviticus 18:5 could have been their favorite proof-text that the Law is the source of life.⁴ However, Paul counters that incorrect understanding of the Old Testament by citing another passage (Deuteronomy 30:12-14) in verses 6-8. The citation of Deuteronomy leads us to the second aspect.

2. Dependency

In Deuteronomy 30 these words are said to God's covenant people as an encouragement to them that God has come to them. They need not ascend to heaven or descend into the abyss. The word is close by and near them. It can be received. Paul takes this same concept and adds some parenthetical thoughts connected to Christ. They need not bring Christ down from heaven (v. 6b). They need not bring Christ up from the grave (7a). The word of faith that Paul proclaims is near to them because it was brought to them.

Therefore, they do not need superhuman strength or achievements in order to receive God's grace. God has already done the work. He brought Christ near to them, he raised him from the dead, and he exalted him to his ascended status. God has done the work of salvation for them.

3. Believing

How does someone actually receive righteousness? Paul's answer is found in verses 9-10.

⁹ because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. Romans 10:9–10 (ESV)

Now I'm covering these in a different order than in the text on purpose. The order is explained by Paul in verse 10: The heart believes and then confesses what is believed. To believe means to accept

⁴ Paul uses the same Leviticus text in Galatians 3:12 in order to prove that the law is not of faith. It seems that Paul's interpretation of Leviticus 18:5 is that the one who keeps the law ("if a person does them") must keep it totally ("he shall live by them").

something as true or to put one's trust in. To believe in Jesus means that you believe what the Bible says about him and what the Bible says about you. The point here is simply that salvation does not come by works, but it comes by believing in the work of another, namely Jesus.

What saves a person is not belief alone. A person is declared righteous by God by believing in Jesus. It means that you look away from your works and you believe in the work of Jesus for you. Salvation comes to those believe.

4. Calling

True belief in the heart is not silent. It is verbalized, and that is why belief is so closely linked to what is said or declared. Paul uses two words, "confess" and "call," in these verses to capture this important reality. Notice how these words are used:

- "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord...you will be saved" (10:9)
- "with the mouth one confesses and is saved" (10:10)
- "...bestowing his riches on all who call on him" (10:12)
- "...everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (10:13)

While they are different words, confess and call both have the same purpose: a verbal expression of belief in the heart. To confess means to say the same thing about Jesus and yourself that God says. It means to agree with God or to submit to him. The call means to verbally invite the help that is so desperately needed.

So rather than working for one's righteousness, the gospel invites us to receive it. To believe in what God has done for us in Christ, to call upon him for our righteousness, and agree with God regarding who Jesus is and what he has done.

The scandal of the gospel is that righteousness comes to people like this, not by their hard work, effort or their self-attained righteousness. What must you do to be saved? Believe in Jesus.

5. Anyone

The final aspect of receiving righteousness is absolutely glorious! Remember that the great irony of redemption is the way that those who zealously pursued righteousness missed it (Israel) while those who did not pursue did find it (Gentiles). Paul now makes that very, very clear.

Verses 11-13 are some of the most glorious verses in the entire Bible:

¹¹ For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame."¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him.¹³ For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Romans 10:11–13 (ESV)

Did you hear the sweeping offer of salvation? The grace of God through Jesus is now extended to "everyone," with no distinction, bestowing riches on all who call on him, such that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

This is the beauty of God's grace! And what we find here needs to be considered by every single person, regardless of how religious or irreligious you are. The truth in this passage is life-changing no matter who you are.

There is a warning in this passage for those who are "religious." By that I mean you have been around spiritual things for much of your life, and you know all the religious jargon and phrases. Here is the caution from this passage: Don't stop trusting in Jesus.

Your spiritual heritage, while a great blessing, is not a sufficient foundation for righteousness. What you haven't done or what you have done for God is not the basis for your hope. Your only security when you stand before a holy God is that your sins are covered by the blood of Jesus. To be a Christian means that you have trusted in Christ. And the rest of your life is marked by that heart-based, mouth-confessing trust.

Don't drift from trusting Christ after you've trusted him for the first time. Your assurance is based upon trust. You fight sin based upon trust. You produce good works because of trust. You love selflessly because of trust. You endure suffering by trusting. You respond to unfairness by trusting. Your entire life is marked by the one reality that has changed everything: trust in Jesus. And you must fight hard to remind your heart that trust is the basis of who you are and what you hope to be.

Additionally, if you are here today, and you are not a very "religious" person, this text has a very important message for you. I want you to understand that God's grace is extended to people regardless of what they've done or how bad they have been. I'm sure that you, like all of us, have things in your past that you regret and things for which you are even ashamed. The solution, according to Romans 10, is simply that if you believe in Jesus, you will be saved.

If you believe that he is the Son of God who died for your sins, and if you will look to him as the basis of your hope and your forgiveness, you can be saved, cleansed, and rescued. It doesn't matter if you blew it an hour ago, and now you are sitting in church. It doesn't matter that this is the only time that you've been in church for years. What matters is that you believe in Jesus. And if you believe today, you will be saved. So what is stopping you? Why not come to faith in Jesus right now? Why not confess that he is Lord and believe that God raised him from the dead? Why not come to Jesus right now?

There is nothing greater, more transforming or hopeful than trusting in Jesus. ¹³ *For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Romans 10:13 (ESV)*

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