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WHY RELIGIOUS PEOPLE MISS SALVATION

Romans 10:1-4

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December 18, 2011

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Romans Lesson 63

Why Religious People Miss Salvation Romans 10:1-4

Imagine a dear old lady who all her life has faithfully attended a mainline Protestant Church in her small town in the Bible belt. She has helped with the nursery and children's ministries, worked in the kitchen during socials, and served in the women's missionary society. Everyone who knows her says that she is one of the sweetest persons they know.

She is married to a mean old cuss who has no time for religion. He says that the church is full of hypocrites and do-gooders. Why should he hang out with people like that? He prefers his buddies at the local tavern, who can tell some good off-color jokes, place a friendly bet on a football game, and who swap stories about their latest fishing or hunting adventures. He would rather that his wife not go to church, but years ago he realized that it gave him the freedom to go fishing on Sunday mornings. So he jokes that he's going to baptize a few worms while she gets her religious fix for the week.

If you were to ask her, "On what basis do you hope to get into heaven?" the question would shock her. Why would you even ask? If she could find words to reply, she would say, "Well, all good people go to heaven. I've always tried my best to be nice to others. I've served at church in various ways. And I've usually been able to ignore the mean comments that my husband hurls at me. God knows that I've done the best that I could. I feel that I will go to heaven because I'm a good person."

Lately, her husband hasn't been feeling very well. But like most tough old geezers he avoids the doctor like the plague. But finally he gets worried enough that he schedules an appointment. The doctor runs a few tests and then gently gives him the bad news: "You've got advanced cancer. If you had come a few years ago, we might have gotten it. But there's not much that we can do now. You might have a few months to live."

He goes downhill fast, so they arrange for hospice care. One day, a hospice worker whom he likes is able to share the gospel with him. She tells him that God offers forgiveness for all his sins as a free gift if he will repent of his sins and trust in what Christ did for him on the cross. She leaves him with a Gospel of John. Since he knows his time is short, he devours it. As he reads, God opens his eyes to see his sin and his need for the Savior. He sees that Jesus is God's Son, the Savior of all who trust in Him. He puts his trust in Christ, dies a few weeks later, and goes to heaven.

His wife wouldn't ever say it, but she is secretly relieved that he is gone. He was always so difficult to live with. She continues with all of her religious activities through the church. A few years later, she dies. Because she was trusting in her own righteousness, this nice old lady goes to hell. She had never trusted in Christ as the necessary perfect righteousness that God gives to all who believe.

That story, while fictional, describes one of the most common misconceptions about the most important subject imaginable: How does a person get eternal life and go to heaven? It's a topic where you don't want to be in error! There are no second chances. The Bible plainly says that we die once and then face judgment (Heb. 9:27). There are no makeup exams! And, contrary to popular opinion, God doesn't grade on the curve. It's pass or fail, and to pass you must score 100 percent perfect righteousness. One sin in thought, word, or deed and you face God's eternal judgment!

In our text, Paul is explaining why some very religious people missed salvation. The Jews were about as religious as anyone could be. They were fastidious about keeping the Law of Moses. In fact, to interpret that Law correctly, so that nobody missed it, they devised hundreds of extra laws. Keeping the Sabbath holy wasn't specific enough for them, so they had rules about how far you could walk and about what constituted work on the Sabbath. For example, when Jesus on the Sabbath made clay with His spittle to anoint a blind man's eyes, the Jewish religious leaders accused Him of breaking the Sabbath (John 9:6, 16). They had rules on washing and cleanliness that added to the Law (Mark 7:3). But they missed salvation and even crucified the Savior!

In the larger context, Paul is responding to the question, "If God is faithful to His promises to His chosen people, then why are

most Jews rejecting Christ?" And, can we then trust that He will be faithful to His promises to us? In chapter 9, Paul's emphasis was on God's sovereignty. It was never His sovereign plan to save all the Jews. Rather, He always accomplishes His purpose by saving a remnant which He has chosen according to grace. The rest He leaves in their sins and He will be glorified when He judges them. Thus if we're saved, it is totally due to God's gracious election.

But many will sputter, "That's not fair!" So in chapter 10, Paul shifts the emphasis to man's responsibility. He shows that the Jews who were lost had no basis to blame God. Their spiritual pride made them think that their religious practices and good works would qualify them for heaven. But people who think that they are good enough for God get offended if you tell them that they are sinners that need a Savior. And so they took offense at Christ and stumbled over Him (9:33). They were lost because of their spiritual blindness, sin, and unbelief. So Paul is showing us why religious people often miss salvation:

Religious people miss salvation because they think that their good works will satisfy God's demand for righteousness, so they don't trust in Christ for righteousness.

Note four things:

1. Religious people often miss salvation in spite of the prayers and deep concern of godly people, but we should pray anyway (10:1).

Romans 10:1: "Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation." Four observations:

- A. The doctrine of election does not negate our need to pray for the salvation of the lost.

Sometimes those who argue against the doctrine of election will say, "If God sovereignly chooses who will be saved, then what's the point of praying for anyone's salvation? If God has chosen them, they will be saved whether you pray or not. If He hasn't chosen them, your prayers won't do any good." So they contend that belief in the doctrine of election kills prayer for the lost.

But the apostle Paul didn't follow that line of reasoning. In Romans 9:11, he could not have been clearer in stating that God

chose Jacob and rejected Esau apart from any good works that they would do, "so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand." While we're still sputtering, "That's not fair!" he adds (9:16), "So then it [salvation] does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy." He states it even more strongly (9:18), "So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires." He adds (9:23) that those of us whom God calls to salvation are "vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory." He couldn't be much stronger on the doctrine of God's sovereign election.

But here he is a few verses later saying that his heart's desire and prayer to God was for the salvation of the Jews. There is no contradiction between God's sovereign election and our heartfelt prayers. How do they fit together? God's sovereign plan includes our prayers and our preaching the gospel to the lost (10:14-15). God saves His elect through our prayers and our preaching. In fact, if God has done all that He can do to save lost people and now it's up to their free will, then it's a waste of time to pray for their salvation. God would be in heaven saying, "Yeah, I'd sure like to see them get saved, too. But My hands are tied. It's up to them now!"

There is a parallel to this balance between God's sovereignty and our responsibility to pray in Daniel 9:1-3. Daniel was reading the prophet Jeremiah and he observed that Jeremiah had prophesied that Israel would be in captivity in Babylon for 70 years. Daniel did the math and realized that the time for them to be restored was rapidly approaching. So did he sit back to wait for God to act? No, rather Daniel sought the Lord "by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth and ashes" (Dan. 9:3). God sovereignly prophesied what He would do, but Daniel earnestly prayed that He would do it! And so we should pray for the salvation of lost people. We do not know who the elect are, but God uses our prayers to save them. But note something else about Paul's prayer for the salvation of the Jews:

B. Unanswered prayers for the salvation of the lost should not discourage us from praying.

Paul's prayer for the salvation of the Jews was unanswered in his lifetime! It's like praying the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:10), "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Christians have been praying that request for almost 2,000 years, but it's still not fully answered. We see partial answers as people that we're praying for come under the lordship of Christ and learn to obey Him. It will be answered fully when Jesus returns. But we should keep praying for His kingdom to come and His will to be done, even though we know that eventually it will happen and even though we may not see thorough answers to it in our lifetimes. And, if you're praying for the salvation of a friend or loved one, keep praying as long as the person is alive. We can't understand how our prayers interface with God's sovereign will, but we should keep praying.

- C. Don't assume that religious friends and relatives are saved, but rather pray all the more for their salvation.

Sometimes we see people who are atheists or blatantly anti-Christian and we think, "They will never come to faith in Christ!" But then we see good, nice, religious people and think, "They don't need to come to Christ." Wrong on both counts! Jesus was a friend to the corrupt tax collectors and immoral prostitutes because He knew that they were sick and needed Him as a spiritual physician (Luke 5:30-32). But the religious Pharisees were not good enough to get into heaven by their religiosity. They needed the new birth if they wanted to see the kingdom of God (John 3:3). So if you have religious family or friends, don't assume that they're saved just because they're religious. Pray for God to convict them of their pride and self-righteousness, so that they will see their need for salvation. One final thought on verse 1:

- D. Pray especially for the salvation of those who have been mean or unkind to you.

Paul suffered terribly at the hands of the Jews. They saw him as a turncoat, who associated with the despised Gentiles, and so they dogged his steps and tried to assassinate him. It would be understandable if he had said, "Let them go to hell! They deserve it!" But instead, his heart's desire and his constant prayer was that God would save them. Jesus told us (Matt. 5:44), "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" So if you have a family member who ridicules your faith or is abusive because of your love for Christ, especially pray for his or her salvation. Make a list of the

lost people in your family or in your everyday world and begin to pray earnestly for their salvation.

But why are religious people often lost? Paul explains:

2. Religious people often miss salvation in spite of their zeal for God, because their zeal is not in accordance with knowledge (10:2).

Romans 10:2: "For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge." Paul himself had been more zealous for his Jewish religion than most of his contemporaries, but it resulted in his persecuting the church (Gal. 1:13-14). In our day, Muslims are zealous for God as they understand Him, but their zeal causes them to kill Christians and even family members who profess faith in Christ. Jehovah's Witnesses are zealous for God, but they promote the fatal view that Jesus is not fully God, and so their zeal only increases their condemnation.

We live in a day that disparages absolute truth and doctrinal precision. The cultural belief is that each person should determine his own truth. What's true for you may not be true for me, and vice versa. So we should "co-exist," as the bumper sticker preaches. If that means that we should be civil and polite towards one another, of course that is true. But if it means that it doesn't matter whether you're a Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, or atheist, it is fatally flawed!

Just as it matters greatly whether you take the exact drug that the doctor has prescribed in the exact amounts at the proper times, so it matters eternally whether you believe in Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of God who took on human flesh, died for your sins, and was raised from the dead. If you are zealous for a different "Jesus" or a way of salvation other than faith alone in Christ alone, Paul says that you are to be damned (Gal. 1:6-9).

All roads do not lead to the top. Being sincere or zealous is not enough. Good intentions are not good enough if they are mistaken about the truth of the gospel. Religious zeal must always be tested against the core truth of the unchanging gospel. (Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: Saving Faith* [Zondervan], 10:20-25 gives numerous tests of false and true zeal.)

3. Religious people often miss salvation because they do not know about God's perfect righteousness and so they seek to establish their own righteousness (10:3).

Romans 10:3: "For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God." Paul does not mean that the Jews did not know that God is righteous. Anyone familiar with the Old Testament would know that. He means that the Jews did not understand God's saving righteousness, namely, that He imputes righteousness to the one who believes in His appointed substitute. The ESV and NIV both capture the sense of the genitive. Rather than being possessive (NASB), it is a genitive of source: "being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God" (ESV). Paul explains this with regard to his own conversion (Phil. 3:9), "not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith."

This perfect imputed righteousness was revealed to the Jews in Genesis 15:6, "Then he [Abram] believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." Paul cited that text in Romans 4:3 and expounded on it in that chapter. So the ignorance of the Jews was not due to lacking information. It was willful ignorance stemming from their pride in keeping the Law. The Pharisees proudly thought that they were keeping the Law because they didn't murder (unless they had "good" cause, as when they murdered Jesus!) and they didn't commit adultery. But Jesus convicted them by showing that God looks on the heart (Matt. 5:21-30). To be sinfully angry with your brother is to murder him. To lust after a woman in your heart is to commit adultery with her.

And so the problem with the religiously proud Jews was, "they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God." To do so, they would have had to admit that they were sinners and that their good works could never justify them. They would have had to admit that all their good deeds were as filthy rags in God's sight (Isa. 64:6). James Boice (*Romans: God and History* [Baker], 3:1161) uses the analogy of a woman who is dying of a disease and refuses to go to a doctor because she insists that she looks fine when she puts on her makeup. Yes, her face may look fine with her

makeup on, but she needs to deal with the internal disease. Yes, religious people may look good with all their good deeds. But if they do not submit to their need for God's perfect righteousness credited to their account, their good deeds are just makeup.

Thus religious people often miss salvation in spite of the prayers and concern of godly people for their salvation. They miss salvation because their zeal for God is not in line with knowledge. They miss salvation because they do not know about God's righteousness and so they seek to establish their own.

4. Religious people miss salvation when they do not trust in Christ as their righteousness (10:4).

Romans 10:4: "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." This is a wonderful verse, but unfortunately it is one of the most disputed verses in all of Paul's letters (Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], p. 544). The problem is that the word "end" (Greek, *telos*) has different nuances of meaning. It can mean "termination," in the sense that Christ ended the Mosaic Covenant when He inaugurated the New Covenant. It can mean "goal," in the sense that the law existed to point people to Christ (Gal. 3:23-25). Or, it can mean "fulfillment" or "culmination," in the sense that all of the Old Testament types, rituals, and sacrifices pointed to and were fulfilled in Christ (Matt. 5:17).

All of those nuances are true with regard to Christ, but the difficult question is, "Which meaning does Paul intend in Romans 10:4?" Douglas Moo (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], pp. 637-642) argues that two nuances are intended, namely that Christ is the termination of the Law of Moses and that He is the culmination of all that the Law anticipated.

But Thomas Schreiner is probably correct when he argues that based on the relationship between 10:3 & 4, it means "termination" in an experiential sense. In other words, in 10:4 Paul is responding to the specific Jewish error mentioned in 10:3, that they used the law to try to establish their own righteousness. Thus in 10:4 Paul is saying (*ibid.*, p. 547), "Those who trust in Christ cease using the law to establish their own righteousness."

In line with that, Everett Harrison argues (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [Zondervan], 10:111), "Paul's

contention regarding the Jew (v. 3) is not the incompleteness of his position, which needed the coming of Christ to perfect it, but the absolute wrong of that position, because it entailed an effort to establish righteousness by human effort rather than by acceptance of a divine gift." John MacArthur agrees (*The MacArthur Study Bible, New American Standard Bible, Updated Edition* [Nelson Bibles], p. 1680), "Paul means that belief in Christ as Lord and Savior ends the sinner's futile quest for righteousness through his imperfect attempts to save himself by efforts to obey the law."

So verses 3 & 4 are saying that either you are seeking to be right with God by establishing your own righteousness through good deeds and morality (10:3), in which case you will miss God's salvation, because all such attempts fall short. Or, you will recognize that you need perfect righteousness to stand before God. Thus you will abandon your own attempts to establish your righteousness and trust in Christ alone to be your righteousness (10:4). His perfect righteousness is credited to your account, so that God declares you to be righteous or justified.

Conclusion

God's way of salvation is not the way of the sweet little old lady, the way of being a good, religious person, because you can never be good enough. One sin disqualifies you from getting into heaven, no matter how much you try to counterbalance it with good works. We're all born with the terminal "disease" of sin, which grows progressively worse as we age. Don't be deceived into thinking that the "makeup" of good works will avert the judgment of God, who knows the thoughts and intentions of our hearts.

God's way of salvation is to trust in Jesus Christ so that the righteousness of God is imputed to your account. As Paul put it (Rom. 3:24), "Being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." Have you received that gift?

Application Questions

1. Why would God ordain that we pray for His sovereign plan to be accomplished?
2. What are some biblical tests to determine whether zeal is godly or ungodly? To what extent is zeal a matter of personality?
3. Why must we *subject ourselves* to the righteousness of God (10:3)? What does that verb imply?
4. How would you apply this message if you were witnessing to a religious person who thought that salvation is by good works?

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