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THE RIGHT AND WRONG WAYS TO GOD

Romans 9:30-33

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December 11, 2011

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Romans Lesson 62

The Right and Wrong Ways to God Romans 9:30-33

If you were to ask in a poll, "How does a person get into heaven?" you would most often hear, "By being a good person." There may be slight variations: "By sincerely trying to do your best." "By being moral or religious." "By doing good works and helping the poor."

You would find the same answers in any country or culture where you asked that question. When we were in Nepal, we went to a Hindu temple and encountered some very strange looking men. What was behind their bizarre appearance? They were trying to please the gods in order to earn a higher place in the next life. We saw people there making sacrifices and bathing in the filthy river in an attempt to atone for their sins and purify themselves. We went to a Buddhist temple and saw variations of the same thing. Buddhist monks take a vow of poverty and are devoted to hours of prayers and rituals every day.

Muslims believe the same thing. They must say the creed and the prescribed prayers five times a day, give alms, observe the fast of Ramadan, make a pilgrimage to Mecca, and perform their other rituals in order to go to heaven. The cults are all based on the same principle: The way to heaven is through good works. This may require knocking on doors to share your faith, going on a two-year mission, tithing your money, abstaining from certain foods and drinks, and other duties.

But such an approach to God is not limited to non-Christian religions or cults. Many in Christian religions think that they can earn right standing before God by going to mass and confession, doing good works, and sometimes by harsh treatment of their bodies. Martin Luther was a classic example. He gave up a career in law to join a monastery where he devoted himself to prayers and fasting, penance and the confession of sins, and living in self-imposed harsh conditions. He was trying to earn salvation by his works, but he could not find peace with God because he knew that his works were all tainted by his sin.

What a tragedy it would be to devote your entire life to diligent spiritual efforts to attain right standing with God, only to die and face God's judgment! You've just spent your entire life in religious discipline, denying yourself the common pleasures that others enjoy. You've tried your best to be a good person. But you stand at the gate of heaven and see Jesus refusing to let you in and consigning you to hell.

But as you're standing there in horror, you see Jesus welcoming a man who lived his entire life as a thief. But with his dying breath he cried out, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). The former thief enters into eternal joy with Jesus, while you, who worked so hard for salvation, are turned away! What a shock!

Since life is short and eternity is forever, nothing is more important than understanding the right way to be right with God. And since both fallen human nature and every religion in the world teach the wrong way to come to God, we especially need to understand God's way of righteousness. Paul addresses this crucial issue in our text.

"What shall we say then?" (9:30) serves both to draw a conclusion from the preceding arguments and to introduce a new section. The question that Paul has been focused on in Romans 9 is, "If God is faithful to His covenant promises to His chosen people, then why are most of the Jews rejecting Jesus as their Messiah and Lord?" Paul has shown that it was never God's purpose to save all Israel, but rather only a remnant. God always accomplishes His purpose through a chosen remnant according to His grace. Since all deserve God's wrath and judgment, it is not unfair of Him for His glory to choose some as objects of mercy, but to leave the rest in their sin to glorify His justice in judgment.

Thus Romans 9 is heavily weighted towards God's sovereignty in salvation. There is an inexplicable mystery here, but the Bible is clear that if we're saved, it's totally due to God's sovereign grace and mercy; but if we're lost, it's totally due to our sin and unbelief. No one can blame God for being lost by complaining, "You didn't choose me!" (As an aside, it's interesting that many deny the doctrine of election because it offends their pride. They want to think that they can choose God by their own "free" will.

But if you tell them that they're headed for judgment, they suddenly believe the doctrine of election and use it to blame God for not choosing them!)

From Romans 9:30-10:21, Paul shows why the Jews for the most part were rejecting Christ: They were trying to be saved by their own good works so that they stumbled over Christ. They missed God's way of righteousness through faith in Christ. So the emphasis is on human responsibility and sin. Israel rejected Christ because they were disobedient and obstinate (10:21). And yet God's sovereignty is still present. It is He who put the stone of stumbling and rock of offense in Zion (9:33). It is God's sovereign plan to use the salvation of the Gentiles to provoke Israel to jealousy, so that eventually they will turn to Christ (10:19; 11:11, 14). And, God's sovereignty is seen by the fact that all of this was predicted in the Old Testament, as the frequent citations show.

In our text, Paul lays out the right and wrong ways to come to God. To state the wrong way first:

To approach God through our works will cause us to stumble over Christ and be lost; to approach God through faith in Christ results in righteousness and salvation.

The contrast is plain and stark: If we pursue the righteousness that we need to stand before God by our works we will fail. If we come to God by faith in Christ, we attain righteousness, even if we were not previously pursuing it.

Before we examine both halves of this contrast in more detail, let me point out that there is an inherent danger for those of us who were raised in a Christian home. It is a great advantage to be raised in a Christian home, in that you learn about God and the way of salvation as a child. You're often spared from the destructive scars of sin that those in the world have experienced.

But the danger is that you may trust in your own religiosity and morality, while you resent or despise those who are not so religious or moral. You become like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son: "I've served you for years and always obeyed you, but then you lavish your love on this no-good brother of mine! But what have you ever done for me?" (See Luke 15:28-30.) And so you miss the heart of the gospel, which is God's grace.

1. To approach God through our works is built on faith in ourselves and will cause us to stumble over Christ and be lost (9:31-33).

Scholars spill a lot of ink debating what Paul means by “a law of righteousness” (9:31), but it probably refers to the Law of Moses that Israel pursued to try to attain righteousness before God. But Israel failed to attain that righteousness because they did not pursue the law by faith, but as if it could be attained by works. In so doing, they were only seeking to establish their own righteousness (10:3), which always falls short. This wrong approach caused them to stumble over the stumbling stone, which is Christ.

- A. To approach God through our works is fundamentally flawed because it is built on faith in our sinful selves.

I’m shocked often to hear professing Christians say that their success is because they have learned to believe in themselves. Formerly, they had low self-esteem and didn’t believe in themselves. But now they tell us, “You’ve got to believe in yourself!” Books on Christian parenting tell us that we need to teach our kids to believe in themselves, to have self-confidence. But where in all of God’s Word does it tell us that we need to have faith in ourselves? It consistently tells us that we can do nothing in ourselves. Rather, we need to cast ourselves totally in dependence on God.

Faith in yourself is *the* fundamental problem when it comes to believing the gospel. Jesus said (Mark 8:34), “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.” Denying yourself to the point of death and believing in yourself are opposite behaviors! Those who try to come to God by works underestimate or are blind to their own sinfulness. They think that they have something in themselves that will commend them to God. But the Bible says that we are unclean and all our good works are like filthy rags in God’s sight (Isa. 64:6). They’re all built on our pride. And even if we could present to God more good works than anyone else in the world, we still have the huge problem of our sin. How can a pile of filthy rags cover the leprosy of sin? To try to approach God through our works is fundamentally flawed because it is built on faith in our sinful selves.

But there is another problem with such an approach:

B. To approach God through our good works will cause us to stumble over Christ.

Romans 9:32b-33, "They stumbled over the stumbling stone, just as it is written, 'Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed [lit., put to shame].'"

The "stone" theme occurs in several Old Testament texts (Gen. 49:24; Ps. 118:22-23; Isa. 8:14; 28:16; Dan. 2:34-35, 44-45) and is used in the New Testament, even on the lips of Jesus, to refer to Christ (Matt. 21:42-44; Luke 2:34; 1 Pet. 2:8). Here Paul combines parts of Isaiah 28:16 and Isaiah 8:14. Isaiah 28:16 reads, "Therefore thus says the Lord God, 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, a costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed. He who believes in it will not be disturbed [lit., in a hurry].'" Isaiah 8:14 says, "Then He shall become a sanctuary; but to both the houses of Israel, a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over, and a snare and a trap for the inhabitants of Jerusalem." Paul takes part of Isaiah 8:14 on judgment, removes the middle of Isaiah 28:16 on the costly cornerstone, and sandwiches the 8:14 excerpt into Isaiah 28:16 to make his point.

Note several things here. First, God sovereignly put the stumbling stone in Israel, but Israel was totally responsible for stumbling over it. Second, Paul is not playing loose with Scripture. Rather, he is showing how the two texts fit together and point to Christ (see James Boice, *Romans: God and History* [Baker], 3:1142). The Isaiah 8:14 passage shows that the Lord Himself is the stone to strike and the rock to stumble over. But in Isaiah 28:16, the Lord puts the stone in place as a cornerstone to build on.

How can the Lord be both the stone itself and yet the one who puts the stone in place? Answer: The Messiah is the Lord God! By combining the text on judgment with the other text on hope, Paul shows that Christ the Lord is both the hope of salvation for those who build their lives on Him and yet at the same time a rock of stumbling and stone of offense for those who take pride in their own good works.

Third, since Romans 9:33 clearly refers to Jesus Christ, it is obvious that the faith that attains to righteousness, which the Gen-

tiles attained, but Israel did not (9:30-32), is faith in Jesus Christ. This is the faith that justifies, which Paul elaborated on in Romans 3:21-4:25). The citation (9:33b), "He who believes in Him will not be disappointed," comes from the LXX. The Hebrew reads, "will not be in a hurry." The idea is that he will not flee from his enemy in haste. The idea of not being disappointed (lit., ashamed) refers to not hearing a negative verdict in judgment. So the two ideas are similar. The one who believes in Jesus as the foundation stone will not fear being condemned at the judgment.

But how is Jesus Christ a stumbling stone to unbelievers? Perhaps the best commentary on this is Paul's explanation (1 Cor. 1:18-31). I can't cite the entire text for sake of time, but the main idea is that the cross confronts human wisdom, strength, and pride. A crucified Savior confounds our idea of what the Savior should be. Israel was looking for a powerful king, the Son of David, born of nobility, who like him would conquer all her enemies. The religious leaders thought that surely He would be educated in the Scriptures and traditions, as they were. He would not be a common man, born to a lowly carpenter who lived in the despised city of Nazareth. Those who followed Him would be, as they the religious leaders were, men of wisdom and learning, connected with those in power. Surely His followers would not be the despised tax-gatherers and prostitutes! Or, if a few of this riff-raff got into the kingdom, they would occupy the lowly place by the door. But the religious leaders would be in the place of honor at Messiah's side!

Paul writes (1 Cor. 1:23), "But we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." He goes on to point out that not many of the Corinthian believers were wise according to the flesh, or mighty or noble by the world's standards. The reason they were believers is that God chose them (1 Cor. 1:27-28, 31).

But perhaps you're wondering, "Why would God deliberately place a stone of stumbling and rock of offense in Zion? Why would He give the world a lowly, crucified Savior and a way of salvation that causes many to be offended?" As James Boice points out (*ibid.*, p. 1145), this wasn't the way a modern advertising executive would devise a campaign to "sell" the gospel! Show people

how Jesus will help them succeed at work and have happy families. Show them how Jesus will help them reach their full potential. Minimize all that negative stuff about sin and judgment. What people need is a positive, uplifting message to build their self-esteem!

But the reason the true gospel inherently offends is that it confronts our sinful pride (1 Cor. 1:29). If God sovereignly shows mercy to whom He desires and hardens whom He desires (Rom. 9:18), then I can't boast in why I was shown mercy. In fact, the very idea that I need *mercy* is offensive. Sure, I'm not perfect, but why can't God just give me a little boost? How about a few helpful hints for happy living? *Mercy* implies that I'm a spiritual basket case, unable to do anything to gain God's favor! Precisely!

I can't boast in my intellect, because it actually would keep me from trusting in Christ. I can't boast in my morality, because if you could see my heart, you would see that it is not morally pure, but putrid. I can't boast in my good works, because I just do them to make myself look good to others. And they are puny in comparison to how I look out for myself above all else. So God deliberately put Christ and Him crucified at the center of salvation to humble our pride, which is the root of all of our sins. As Charles Simeon put it (*Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible* [Zondervan], 15:371), "Any plan of salvation which gives no offense to self-righteous men, is certainly not of God."

And so to approach God through our good works will cause us to stumble over Christ. To come in faith to Christ, God must humble our pride. That leads us to the right way to come to Him:

2. To approach God through faith in Christ results in perfect righteousness and salvation.

Here I'm focusing on Romans 9:30, "That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith." And, 9:33b, "And he who believes in Him will not be disappointed." When you look at 9:31-32, it is clear that Paul is contrasting the righteousness that comes by faith with the attempt to achieve righteousness by works of the law. This takes us back to his discussion in chapters 3 & 4. Three thoughts:

- A. We need a perfect righteousness which only comes through faith in Jesus Christ.

Clearly, *righteousness* is Paul's theme here (repeated four times in 9:30-31). He is referring to the perfect righteousness of God, which he spoke about in 1:17, "For in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'But the righteous man shall live by faith.'" Then after showing the sinfulness of both Gentiles and Jews (1:18-3:20), Paul concludes (3:20), "Because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin." In other words, you can't be right with God by keeping His law, because we all fail to keep it perfectly. Just one instance of not loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, or of not loving our neighbor as we love ourselves, and we're guilty (Matt. 22:37-40; James 2:10). But then Paul continues (Rom. 3:21-24):

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.

In other words, salvation by human righteousness always falls short. We need God's righteousness, imputed to us. This refers to justification, where God declares the believing sinner acquitted and He imputes the very righteousness of Christ to that sinner's account. Paul says that Gentiles (referring to that class of people as a whole) were not even pursuing such righteousness, but they attained it. How? God graciously sought them with the good news that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. They knew that they fit that description and that they needed salvation. So they believed in Christ and were justified.

B. To come to God through faith, we must renounce our merit and works as the basis for approaching God.

We can't bring our best efforts and combine them with the righteousness of Christ. That muddies the pure water of His righteousness and it robs Him of glory. To follow Jesus, we must deny ourselves, especially deny our self-righteousness and good deeds as the basis for right standing with God. Salvation is not a joint project, where we try hard and let God do the rest. It is *all* of God.

- C. To come to God through faith, we must entrust our right standing with God totally to the merits and substitutionary death of Jesus Christ on our behalf.

John Calvin expressed this beautifully (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], p. 379):

But how they stumble at Christ, who trust in their works, it is not difficult to understand; for except we own ourselves to be sinners, void and destitute of any righteousness of our own, we obscure the dignity of Christ, which consists in this, that to us all he is light, life, resurrection, righteousness, and healing. But how is he all these things, except that he illuminates the blind, restores the lost, quickens the dead, raises up those who are reduced to nothing, cleanses those who are full of filth, cures and heals those infected with diseases? Nay, when we claim for ourselves any righteousness, we in a manner contend with the power of Christ; for his office is no less to beat down all the pride of the flesh, than to relieve and comfort those who labor and are wearied under their burden.

Conclusion

Christ is either one or the other to you right now: A rock in which you believe and build your life, who will justify you at the judgment. Or, He is a stone of stumbling and rock of offense to your sinful pride. Don't stumble over Christ by trusting in your good works to save you, as all of the world's religions teach. Trust in Christ alone and you will not be ashamed at the judgment!

Application Questions

1. Why is it crucial to understand that we are not saved by faith *plus* works, but rather by faith *for* good works (Eph. 2:8-10)?
2. Is there a legitimate place for self-confidence or pride? Is there biblical support for such ideas?
3. How does "marketing" Jesus as the way to success obscure and confuse the offense of the cross?
4. Discuss: Humanly speaking, who is more difficult to reach with the gospel: a good, religious person or a gross sinner? How should our approach differ with each of these types?

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